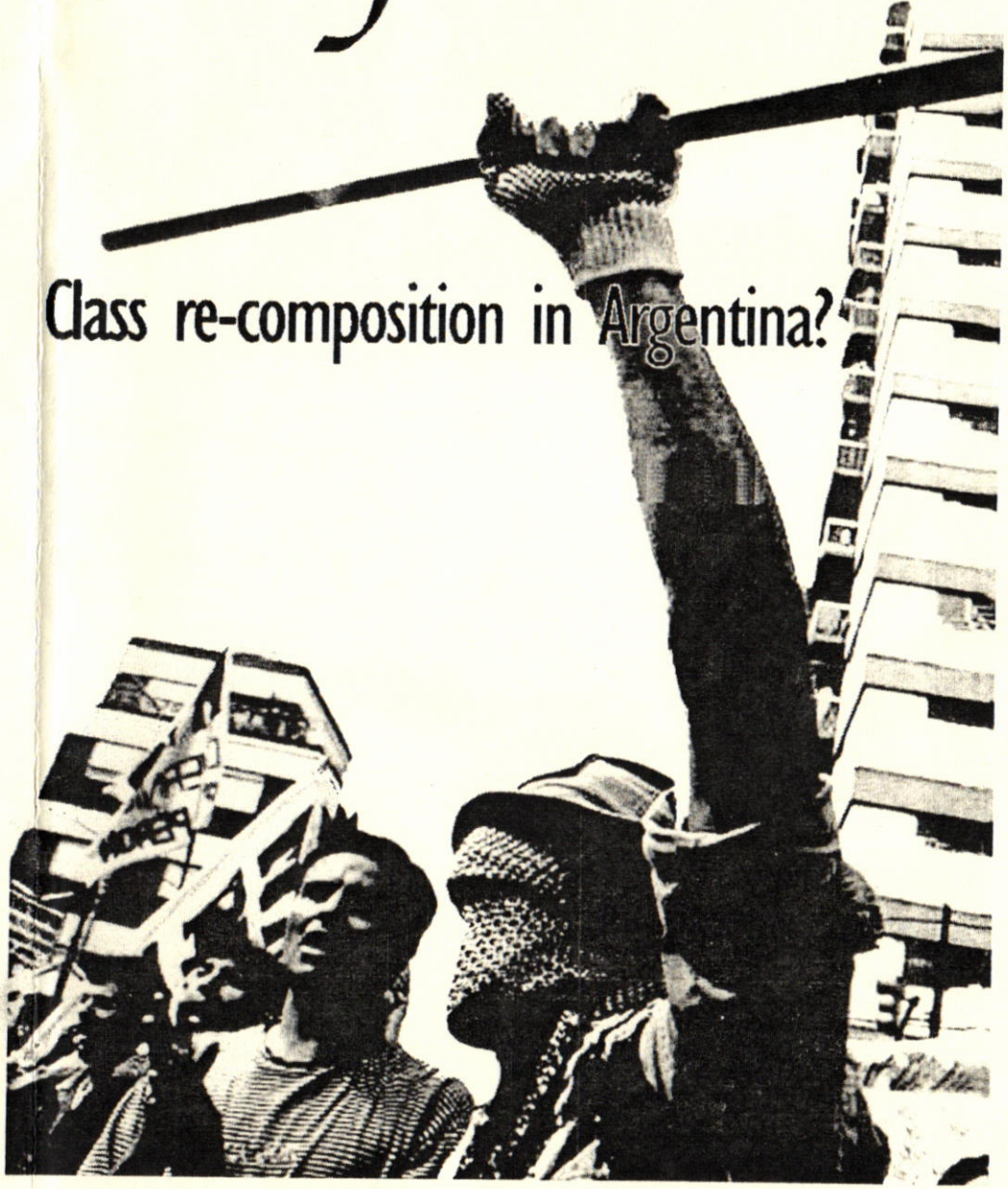
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Aufheben

Class re-composition in Argentina?



TREASON PRESS PAMPHLETS

'Anti-Capitalism' as Ideology...and as Movement?
From the 2001 issue of the excellent annual communist journal from Britain, *Aufheben*, a critique of the anti-summit movement.

Behind the Twenty-First Century Intifada
Also from the 2001 issue of *Aufheben* a look at the proletarian elements of the Palestinian revolt in opposition to the usual presentation of it as a purely nationalist, state-building affair.

Class Struggle in Iraq
Four articles about war, mutiny and near-revolution in Iraq.

Globalisation: Origins-History-Analysis-Resistance
An article from the 1999 issue of British eco-anarchist/communist journal *Do Or Die*.

Mutinies: A Historical Reader
A collection of articles on mutinies against the Vietnam, Bosnia and Kosovo wars.

Outside and Against the Unions
A communist critique of trade unions focusing on the 1984-5 miners strike in Britain from British group *Wildcat*.

'Picket and Pot-banger Together': Class Re-composition in Argentina
A long article on the proletarian revolts in Argentina from the 2002 issue of *Aufheben* along with two shorter articles on the situation there.

Society of the Spectacle
The classic 1967 critique of spectacular capitalism by Guy Debord of *The Situationist International*.

The Neoliberal Wars
Articles on the wars in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Chechnya and Afghanistan as well as a theoretical discussion of how neo-liberalism leads to civil war.

Whither the World
Co-author of the classic *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the communist Movement* Gilles Dauve and Karl Nesic discuss the current malaise of both capital and proletariat in this piece from early 2002.

It seems as if security and the political criteria of the blockade always respond to the internal needs of the organization, rather than to the political conjuncture or to any possible external support.

Yes, but these internal necessities entail much more than our "economic needs." For example, we blockaded because of the events at Mosconi; those events implicated our identity, because if a compañero is affected in Mosconi, well, that also concerns us, even if it is something that does not seem to affect us directly in Solano.

Likewise, we blockaded the Pueyrredon Bridge because the compañeros at La Matanza were under the threat of repression; we said to the government, "to repress over there, you'll have to also repress over here." We saw that they were beating our brothers (despite D'Elia and Alderete), so we had to come out to fight for them. Keep in mind, though, we do not build toward the conjuncture. We are not interested in elections, whether people should vote or not.

Another example; when Patricia Bullrich organized an offensive, we said, "we have to come out because they want to cut our plans, they don't want to renew them." It was an attempt to put a stop to our organization. What we never do is to come out when a super-structural power tries to convene us, when an organization with a pre-determined political agenda tries to mobilize us; we analyze and decide upon a situation according to our own agenda.

We don't want to foreclose anyone's space; we don't want to be a vanguard. We build because there is a reality that needs to be transformed, and we organize and join-up with those that are changing their situation. We are not interested in going to La Matanza to harangue and agitate, just in order to gain space. We don't conceive politics in that manner. Yes, we believe that the base needs to be organized, but it is up to the compañeros at La Matanza to organize their own area. We want to coordinate our movement with those that are building theirs, but we don't dispute them any political space.

It can't be said, as others claim, that we are just a "base" movement. We do have a political project. In fact, we do know how to read the current political conjuncture, but our project occurs at the neighborhood level, with the people. Our analysis is more comprehensive, precisely, because we work in this manner. They can't reproach us for lacking a strategy and a guiding political structure; that's a lie. The movement itself is a political tool; all of us, all the compañeros in the movement, constitute this tool and we all work on the analysis. When we are asked what our political project is, we explain that it is this: politics from below, a comprehensive politics from below. Our goal is the complete formation of the person, in every possible sense. Everything counts, everything is important.

We don't believe that we need a national front, one that encompasses the entire country, in order to succeed. I don't believe that there will be an alliance or a front that will take power; there will be many fronts.

Editor's Notes

[1] President of Argentina from 1990 to 1999.
[2] See *Aufheben* "Picket and Pot-Banger..." in this pamphlet.
[3] In June 2000, a riot in the town of General Mosconi left 2 people dead and led to a country-wide piquetero response with 300 road-blocks.

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INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet was produced to make available information about the recent working class struggles in Argentina as these were among the most important in the last few years.

"'Picket and Pot-banger Together': Class Re-Composition in Argentina?" first appeared in the 2002 issue of the excellent annual British communist magazine *Aufheben* and seems to have been completed in late September 2002. It is the best article about the Argentine revolt that is currently available in English. *Aufheben* have a website at www.geocities.com/aufheben2

"Report from Argentina" was written by an anonymous communist from Britain, in December 2002. It discusses the impasse of the movements in Argentina and their recuperation by the Left as well as the continuing weakness of capital there.

"A Conversation with MTD Solano" is an interview with piqueteros from Buenos Aires by the Argentine autonomist Marxist group *Colectivo Situaciones*. In contrast to the more detached perspective of the first two articles by Britons this is a detailed explanation of how the unemployed have organised their powerful assault on capital in Argentina by both constructing new communal social relations and attacking capitalist ones. *Colectivo Situaciones* have a website at www.situaciones.org and can be contacted at situaciones@sinectis.com.ar

Since these articles were written the situation in Argentina has changed for the worse. In April 2003, just before the Argentine presidential election the worker-controlled Brukman textile factory in Buenos Aires was violently evicted by the police although more generalised repression has not yet emerged. In the presidential election eighty percent of those eligible cast valid votes up from a mere sixty percent in the previous election in 2001. This probably represents something of a resigned return to acceptance of the old world after the failure of the insurgent movements to advance in their creation of a new one. Nevertheless the situation in Argentina is far from resolved in the favour of capital with the new president, Nestor Kirchner, representing the wing of the bourgeoisie that wants to avoid a major confrontation with the proletariat for fear that it will lead to an expanded revolt such as occurred in December 2001 in response to the declaration of a state of emergency. However in the absence of large scale state repression a resurgence of the movement in Argentina appears unlikely except perhaps as a response to revolts in other South American countries. In that regard at least there is some reason for optimism with the massive insurrectionary movement in Bolivia in October 2003 the most significant among a series of struggles that have erupted in nearly every country in South America in the last few years.

Canberra, Australia
December 2003

People say that some of the compañeros have a purely pragmatic relationship with the movement; that they only come to get the plan. How does this actually work out in the piquetes?

The majority of the compañeros that join the movement – more than eighty percent – start out only because they have concrete necessities. They need something to eat, they don't have groceries, they don't have work; they have nothing. At first they come for the plans, but once there is a real process, things change, they begin to feel the excitement and the need to get organized. But yes, some compañeros only go because the assembly voted that those failing to attend the blockade don't get a plan.

Some say that taking to the streets is a way of saying "no" to a model, "no" to a system. I think that this can be understood in two different ways: in the first we speculate that the model failed and that you represent the moment when the victims stand forth, like with "Farinello," whose "people" never step out of their role as the witnesses of misery: those that are "left-out," those that beg, the impoverished, the forgotten. But, there is another way to see the issue, one where the model did not fail, where exclusion simply does not exist because there is no place of inclusion, where exploitation is merely a desirable variable in the system. Things being as they are, we feel that the stance taken by most of the people that participate in the piquetes is not that of the victims, rather, they present a very clear subjective desire to work and think actively.

We don't want to be included. At least, I know that I don't want to be exploited ever again, to have Fortabat or Macri as bosses again, that's for sure. I have not struggled just to return to exploitation. I believe, personally, and I believe that many compañeros share this belief in regards to themselves, that I am not made to be included, but this is something else altogether.

One of the things that we know with certainty is, precisely, what we don't want; getting organized makes this clear. To discover where we want to go, what it is that we are building, that is what is uncertain, new, and this is something that has not been closed-off, it's unfinished, something that we think anew every day. The organization is dynamic, it changes and it reflects upon its changes. It's true that the blockades are exciting, but what is truly exiting about the organization is that it brooks no dissociation between that excitement and our everyday lives. That's where the reality of the organization lies; the piquete can only express what we have managed to build in our everyday life, otherwise it is useless. The system has nothing to offer us in regards to this task, and we are forced to build an alternate history. We don't demand things because we want to be included; we only demand things in order to continue getting organized.

How is a piquete agreed upon, how and where do you block the road; who makes the decisions?

Each and every zone reports on their situation. Then, depending upon each neighborhood's situation, a battle plan is proposed. We discuss whether we will march or blockade. Each neighborhood assembly decides upon their action first, then, at the table, we try to reach a consensus based upon the choices made by the different assemblies. We begin to see what we may be able to achieve as the proposals are presented. We never talk about the specific location that we intend to block at the assembly, for security reasons. We choose the method but not the details.

In the assemblies we determine the roles and the zones. For example, we determine which of the compañeros will take care of food, security and any injuries. That is to say, the different zones coordinate particular activities and then there is someone who is elected to serve as a nexus for all these zones. In contrast, other organizations have leaders who decide who does security; yet the location of the blockade and, therefore, the security zone itself – in our experience it is security that decides where a blockade will occur – remains unclear to the leaders. There are many different kinds of organization.

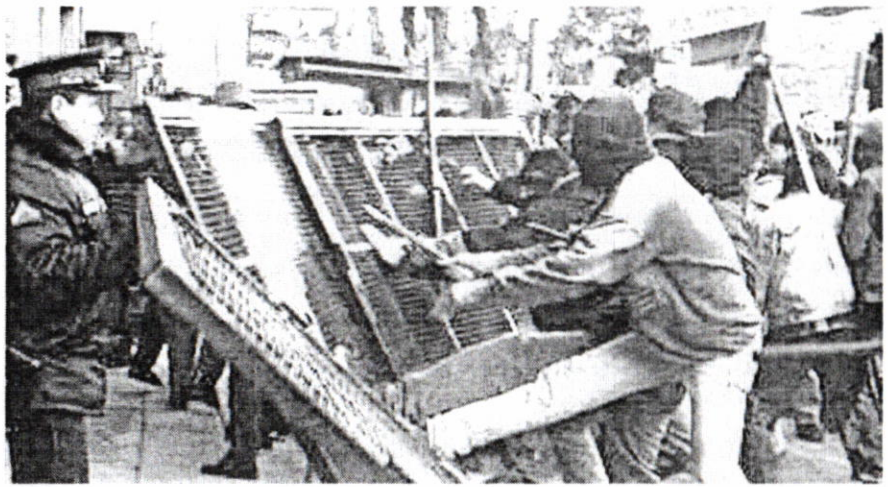
organizations see themselves as political actors and they have revolutionary strategies; we see ourselves, like the Subcomandante Marcos says, as rebels seeking social change. For example, they say that what we call popular education deforms people rather than informing them. They don't make any attempt to tie popular education to political education, on the contrary. We were below, at the bottom, and we don't want to rise, we want to stay there, we will always be rebels. We are at the bottom and we don't want to come up. We have a lot of compañeros that stand out, but none that aspire to lead. We all lead, all of the time.

In any case, these differences won't let us lose sight of the fact that we have to organize, that we have to coordinate and articulate, that it is necessary to go on discussing things and coming to agreements, struggling together. We are not saying that we know the truth and the others don't. We know that we build things differently; but these differences can be coordinated, just as long as we keep raising the call for social change, for dignity, and that we don't take advantage of people, say, by using them to win elections.

I have heard some piquetero compañeros complain that they felt "useless," "forgotten," "left behind," in their everyday lives, yet, at the blockades they feel different; "empowered," they feel that "they have a choice."

It's true; it's a liberated zone, the only place where the cop won't treat you like trash. There, the cop says to you, "pardon me, we come to negotiate." That same policeman would beat you to death if he saw you alone on the street.

It's true that you feel yourself to be in control of an area during a blockade, but I believe that the compañeros are aware that organizing empowers them; that it is not only the blockade, but the organization that makes you strong. For example, today the compañeros are putting up signs on the street, they put up MTD signs, with an small arrow, indicating how to get to the shelter. These are the strong signs of an emerging counter-power.



The proletariat discovers its historic mission on the streets of Salta

PICKET AND POT-BANGER TOGETHER: CLASS RE-COMPOSITION IN ARGENTINA?

A nation implodes...

Following years of 'neo-liberal' restructuring in Argentina, and with thousands of private and state workers not having been paid in the last half of 2001, by the end of that year the social situation was deteriorating fast. The collapse of a heavily indebted economy threatened ever wider social sectors with the loss of their livelihoods. This situation was not going uncontested, however. There were twelve general strikes in 2001 alone. On just one day in August of that year, a huge *piquetero*[1] action involved over 100,000 people and blocked 300 roads.[2]

On the 17th of December the government of De La Rúa announced further cuts. The state budget was to take a further 20% reduction. This meant more cuts in services, wages and pensions. Unemployment already stood at 20% and the *corralito* (banking restrictions) had been put in place on December 3rd to prevent people withdrawing their savings. A generalized insurrection gripped the country. And on the 19th, huge sections of Argentinian society mobilised not only against De La Rúa but against the whole Argentinian political class. On the 15th, organised lootings spread through Argentina's provincial cities; on the 16th and 17th they hit Buenos Aires, where thousands attacked supermarkets, warehouses and shops, as well as official buildings. In Quilmes, in greater Buenos Aires, 2000 people besieged a supermarket and refused to leave until they were given 3000 twenty-kilo bags of food. The movement spread spontaneously. Many banks in the heart of Buenos Aires were burned on the 19th.

De La Rúa denounced this 'anarchy' and instituted a state of emergency. This threat of state repression, a very tangible threat to Argentinians with their memories of the terror of the dictatorship, instead of demobilising people became the spark for an even wider mobilisation. More than a million people filled the centre of Buenos Aires and headed for the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace in the Plaza de Mayo. There were also hundreds of thousands on the streets of most of the other cities: Córdoba, La Plata, Rosario. The impoverished middle classes came out into the streets, in a mass *cacerolazo*, a symbolic protest involving the beating of pots and pans. At exactly the moment when the state attempted to intimidate and create division, with a call to order against the looters, people filled the streets chanting *"the state of emergency – they can stick it up their arse"*. This crucial moment became effectively an endorsement of the insurgency of the previous days. More than 30 people died on the 18th and 19th, shot by shopkeepers and cops at lootings around the country, and in the streets around the Plaza De Mayo in Buenos Aires during riots; but the 'party of order' was decisively pushed back. The massive defiance of the state of emergency appeared to lay to rest the ghost of fear and intimidation from the years of the dictatorship; the phrase *"No te metes"* ("Don't get involved") was no longer heard.

All the main protagonists of this story were involved on the 19th. There were the unemployed, who participated in both the *piquetes* and the lootings all over the country. The 'middle classes' were also there; in the following few days, they would set up popular assemblies in their neighbourhoods. Prefiguring this, people met and discussed on street corners, where many stayed until late into the night, lighting fires in the middle of the roads at the intersections of wide avenues - reminiscent of *piquetero* tactics of the last few years. The workers from the Brukman factory, occupied on the 18th, were there too.

As the 19th turned into the 20th, the *cacerolazo* protest escalated into open confrontation with the state and there was massive street-fighting in the centre of Buenos Aires.[3] At the Obelisk, in the centre of Buenos Aires, hundreds engaged in running street-battles with police – including the *motoqueros*, the motorbike couriers, who gave aid to the fighters from the back of their bikes, charging the police, rescuing those overcome by tear-gas and bringing loads of stones for others fighting. People celebrated, as De La Rúa fled the Casa Rosada by helicopter, with music, champagne and bonbons looted from nearby shops. The banks burned in the centre of Buenos Aires on the 19th and 20th, an expression of anger at the *corralito*; the bank freezes affected not only the middle classes but also many workers with small savings and those who depended on cash by working in the black economy. The demos, riots and lootings took place throughout Buenos Aires province and in more than twelve cities around the country. Barricades were erected in some areas of the capital and massive riots ensued. Many joined the weekly vigil of the mothers of the disappeared in the Plaza de Mayo; some tried to storm the Casa Rosada; the Ministry of the Economy was set alight; and people besieged the home of the hated minister of finance, Cavallo. In Córdoba, the second city, site of Argentina's declining car industry, the breakdown of negotiations over the payment of wages between municipal workers and the council led to an occupation of the council offices, where a popular assembly was held. Thrown out by the police, they tried to burn the building down and build barricades in the street, helped by workers from various factories that had just gone on strike. As in Buenos Aires, lootings occurred involving different sectors of workers and the unemployed. A new slogan against the political class resounded in the streets all over the country, one taken up and much-debated ever since: "Que se vayan todos"[4] (Out with them all).

The new mood appeared to be summed up in a statement by one of the *piqueteros* involved in the MTD Solano (Movement of Unemployed Workers: "We heard rumours of deaths [from repression] but we knew we were participating in something historical and you could feel the solidarity there. We weren't *piqueteros* or middle class; we all felt the sensation of being 'one'". But this provokes the question: What was the nature of this feeling of 'being one'? A problematic cross-class solidarity in which the proletariat were in danger of losing sight of their class needs by joining with other classes affected by the Argentinian crisis? The present article seeks to answer this fundamental question of the composition – or re-composition – of the movements which have been threatening the social order in Argentina over the last 12 months.

In order to gain an understanding of the nature of the current struggles, we need first to place them in their historical context, beginning with Argentina's 'golden era', when the economy revolved around the agro-export business. The rise of Peronism heralded a new 'settlement' with the working class which helps explain some of the peculiarities of the present-day struggles. In this context, we trace the origins and outline the trajectories of the different sections making up today's movement: the unemployed and piqueteros, the situation in the factories, and the impoverished middle classes and the neighbourhood assemblies. While there appears to be a generalized 'rejection of politics', there remains the question of how all these aspects fit together – do the various struggles in Argentina constitute a proletarian attack against capital? Is the 'rejection of politics' a radical advance for the movement, or an expression of sectional fragmentation? We suggest that the 'neo-liberal' attack has resulted in a massification of the class in which the middle classes are being absorbed into the proletariat. This is happening in specific conditions of a country on the periphery of capital, where an immediately social mobilization around the neighbourhood is possible.

There were some hard moments in the first blockades, but things changed after Mosconi.[3] From then on the consciousness of our compañeros changed. At first we had to insist that everything was going to be alright, we had to struggle to keep our compañeros from being frightened, and more often than not we had to keep our sticks and our slingshots hidden. We had strong disagreements on whether to keep our faces covered or not. It took time for people to understand that we needed some kind of self-defense, that the security compañeros could not show their faces to the militias. In the blockades that we did with the congress of La Matanza, the people of the CTA would demand that we remove our hoods. We took that to the assembly, and the assembly decided that we might as well abandon the piquete if we were forced to go unmasked. The system considers the blockades as crimes, they are illegal, but to us they are entirely legitimate. We finally understood this, and it changed our organization fundamentally.

We understand that what makes you different from other organizations of the unemployed is that you organize workshops, projects, task groups, that you have a burgeoning collective life: how does this difference manifest itself in the conception of the piquetes?

I have been to other piquetes and our organization is different to theirs, our security criteria are different, and our compañeros have a different notion of discipline. It would be very surprising to catch one of our compañeros drinking at one of our piquetes; that someone is asked to leave because he is a security risk. There have been a lot of changes in the neighborhoods, in the lives of our compañeros, because you have to keep in mind that these were compañeros who, a year ago, would take 30 pesos in bribes for their vote, who were forced to steal in order to survive.

Our common development, our formation, holds all of this together. That's its bedrock. Nobody imposes a drinking ban, or stops a compañero from drinking; we talk about these things at the assemblies. Basically, the coordinators don't get to decide whether drinking is forbidden or not, rather, we look for a consensus; we discuss the reasons why it might not be prudent. That's the great difference; it's not because you happen to wear a hood, or carry the biggest stick.

When did you get the first plans, the ones that helped you to organize?

In 1997, as soon as we started marching onto the Municipal Hall, we got 50 plans. We didn't do any blockades then, we marched to the Department of Labor. So, we got our first plans through our actions on the Municipal Hall. We achieved autonomy in the handling of the plans after two blockades.

This idea, to transform this relationship with the State: was this a conscious decision at the time?

Yes, and this is what made us different to other organizations, now there are many organizations that are beginning to do the same thing. The problem, basically, was that the municipality would put pressure on the compañeros to keep them from organizing. 120 workers got work under the State's plan; only 5 or 6 of them are still part of the MTD. We soon realized that it made no sense to promote a project that would extend the process we wanted to redress.

We have discussed the heterogeneity of the piquetero movement on several occasions. How do you explain this heterogeneity?

Our difference to that of other movements is becoming increasingly apparent, that is, above all, because many others still work in the classical way: they say, "we seize power from above and then we change things;" while we say, "from below, without any desire to seize power, we struggle." Those other

A CONVERSATION WITH MTD SOLANO

The "Piquetes"

I think that the piquetes blasted away our sense of helplessness, but in a new way. We shook the country out of the lethargic dream that Menem[1] and his politics were selling, like a bolt of bright new light. Together with many other struggles, we woke the country from the sweet dreams of post-modernity. They branded us with a name – the Piqueteros – but for us the piquete became the only way in which we could talk with the rest of the country, our way of telling them that there were other methods of struggle, other ways to fire-up our lives with dignity.

How did this idea arise? How did you get organized?

The piquetes began in the interior, in Cutralco, Tartagal, Mosconi, Santiago del Estero, and they spread throughout the country, blocking the trade routes that fed the most important cities. Once that had started, people started to take the piquetes seriously as a way of fighting, even here, in Buenos Aires, but there were tremendous arguments over the plans; over whether it was correct to ask for the work plans[2] or not. Some said that we were only up to reformist self-help schemes. Instead of getting embroiled in that argument, we decided to put it into practice. At that point our organizing had only reached the level of church groups, but we were always talking about a greater struggle. We were always talking about taking over the Municipality, raising the stakes, and then there was the first road blockade. The first was somewhat improvised, and some of our compañeros were arrested. But, little by little, it started to come into evidence that a new way of fighting had been developed.

The most important thing, however, was that our numbers started to grow; we started to build productive workshops, to enable people, to teach what we were learning, all of those things that are so much more important than the blockades. The blockades are only the most visible element, and so it seems that they are all there is to see, but the struggle is really what we had been doing before. In reality, we only started the blockades once we had already gotten organized.

Yet the press still insists in disparaging us, talking about unemployed hoodlums, masked criminals, entirely marginal people, bums...

It's important to make it clear that from the beginning all of the left, including the progressives, accused us of begging, self-help, reformism, and did not see what the central demands of the organization entail: work, dignity, social change. It was obvious that many things went beyond the plans; even if many organizations did not, because once they had gotten the plans they would call it quits.

The piquetes have changed a lot. At first, in the first blockades, we kept our faces completely uncovered, we did have some rocks, kept hidden, and we did not reveal them because we did not want to frighten people. It was a process; we suffered escalating repression and we started to cover our faces, so that we could not be identified. We only used violence as self- defense. We did not start to throw sticks and stones in order to attack, but to defend ourselves. It is also essential to point out that the piquetes and the plans are just another factor in our struggle; they are not fundamental.

The plans are the reality that allows us to organize ourselves. Clearly, we can't take control over a factory. We are very different from other kinds of organizations, groups that do very real work, because we cannot use the neighborhood organizations as an "excuse" that leads to other goals.

1. The contradictions of the 'golden era' of the agro-export business[5]

As thousands of Argentinians loot stores for food and goods while grain and meat is shipped away to the western markets, the 'iron' laws of the economy are exposed as reified expressions of the class war. Indeed, the whole history of modern Argentina, of its changes in economic strategies and its various crises, is the history of the Argentinian bourgeoisie's battle to reimpose, again and again, capital's control on a fierce, riotous proletariat.

In 1914, Argentina's economy was based on agricultural exports, mainly of grain and beef. The Argentinian bourgeoisie was composed of landowners, who had control of large *latifundias*, and export businessmen, and confronted a huge number of discontented agricultural workers whose pay and conditions were appalling but whose dispersion in a large backward countryside was a great obstacle in their attempts to organize. In the rural region of Patagonia the meat processing, service and transport workers of the small towns of Rio Gallegos and Puerto Deseado were already developing organizations based on small federations. Patagonia's largest union organization, the *Sociedad Obrera de Rio Gallegos*, was centred in the small capital Rio Gallegos and had been active since 1911.

While Argentina's rural hinterland was left underdeveloped, the agro-business trade had necessitated the development of some subsidiary industries and services, such as meat-processing plants, cargo transport, railways, docks, triggering the expansion of a few coastal cities and a growing urban proletariat. The urban workers could organize more easily and by 1914 they were already a combative force and a challenge to the status quo.

The urbanization of the coast, functional to the export-oriented economy, involved the growth of an urban middle class and petit bourgeoisie composed of shopkeepers, petty businessmen, professionals, and civil servants. The development of the urban middle classes and the threat of the proletariat[6] gradually started undermining the power of the agrarian oligarchy. By 1911, the conservative government had to concede to the struggles of the middle classes and the petit bourgeoisie and extended the electoral franchise to include the middle classes and to the bulk of the working class with the law *Sáenz Peña* (1912). In 1916, Hipólito Yrigoyen, candidate for the Radical Party, which represented the middle classes, was elected President of Argentina. Yrigoyen's populist government would combine repression with attempts to recuperate urban and rural working class struggles.

The dominant agrarian and mercantile bourgeoisie had little interest in promoting industrial production or the development of the countryside. However, the viability of Argentina's agrarian export economy depended on the ability of the Argentinian exporters to realize profits by selling on the world market. The vulnerability of this economy, and of the class settlement which it expressed, was exposed by the First World War. Causing disruption to international trade, the war stirred up in Argentina a wave of strikes and insurrections which seriously threatened the bourgeois order. This was the beginning of the end of the era of an economy which was *golden* only to the extent of the Argentinian agrarian oligarchy's pockets. As we will see later, the world crisis of 1929 was to give it the final blow.

Already before the First World War, Argentina's extensive but backward agriculture had begun to reach the limits of cultivable lands, and a change in economic strategy would sooner or later appear necessary to the bourgeoisie. However, with the First World War, the demand for agricultural export goods from the belligerent countries temporarily increased, pushing prices up and rewarding the agro-businessmen with huge profits. But, at the same time, the war caused a shortage in the import of raw material and capital goods, and led to a crisis in many industrial sectors. As unemployment rose and

pay and working conditions worsened, waves of strikes affected transport and urban service sectors, as well as the mostly British or foreign, meat processing plants, in the towns along the coast.

Meanwhile, there was also a change in the representation of the working class. By 1914 the largest union federation in Argentina was the *Federación Obrera Regional Argentina* (FORA), which in its fifth congress in 1905 had adopted an anarcho-communist position. In September 1914 the syndicalist *Confederación Obrera Regional Argentina* (CORA) dissolved themselves to join FORA. The syndicalists opposed FORA's anarcho-communist position and their entry to the federation was conditioned by a promise from the anarchist unions to discuss the problem of common objectives and principles in the forthcoming ninth congress of FORA. During this congress, in 1915, FORA's revolutionary positions were discarded in favour of a position of neutrality towards different political currents within the labour movement – this included the Socialist Party and other parliamentary and moderate currents, but, as we will see, it also gave freedom to the union leaders of FORA to accept any compromise with whoever was in power.[7] Also the revolutionary positions which had up until then characterized the syndicalists were toned down. In fact, while up until then revolutionary syndicalism had encouraged the use of the general strike as a tool to overthrow capitalism, the general strike was now accepted "only when it is exercised with intelligence and energy to repulse the aggression of capitalism and the State".[8] While moderation took root in the mainstream FORA, the now minority unions who were still faithful to revolutionary principles left FORA to create the 'FORA of the fifth congress' (FORA V). The syndicalist FORA was then known as the 'FORA of the ninth congress' (FORA IX).

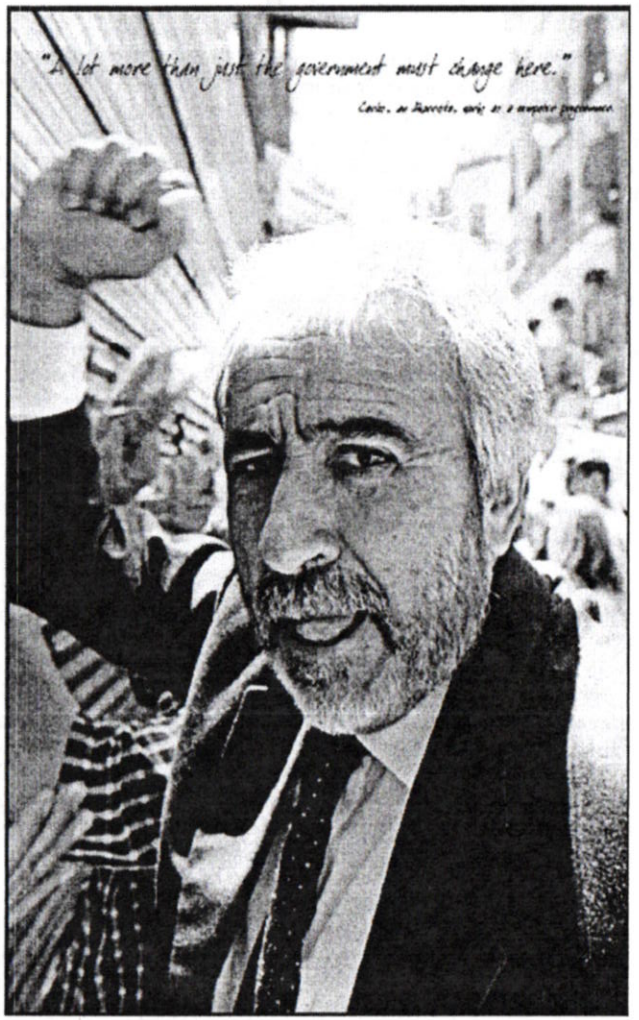
With his election in 1916, the Radical President Yrigoyen sought a conciliatory approach with the working class and started a 'special relationship' with the unions of FORA IX. The Radical government took steps towards introducing labour reforms and intervened in industrial disputes through a representative of the President (the *governor*), sometimes on the side of the workers. On the other hand, Yrigoyen's government severely repressed strikes when no political gain or conciliatory agreements could be obtained or when important interests of capital were at stake.

FORA IX found it difficult to bridle the proletariat into submission and compromise. After 1918 news of the Russian Revolution added to the material conditions of crisis by encouraging the Argentinian proletariat towards an uncompromising confrontation with the system. It was the revolutionary FORA V which took the lead of the new offensive. In January 1919 a major insurrection, which would be known as the *Tragic Week*, exploded in Buenos Aires, provoked by the death of workers during armed confrontations between the police and strikers in the occupied metallurgical plant *Pedro Vasena & Hijos*. FORA V called for a general strike and on the 9th of January a march of 200,000 people led by about a hundred armed workers turned into a victorious battle with the police, while looters raided the city. FORA IX was obliged to join FORA V in calling a general strike for the 10th, whilst at the same time opening negotiations with the government. The struggle continued for the next four days and strikes paralysed the city, while FORA IX, who were able to negotiate and obtain petty concessions limited to the dispute within *Vasena*, tried to discourage the workers from carrying on and appealed for a return to work – but in vain. The insurrection was not really about one isolated dispute in an isolated factory, but about the general discontent shared by everyone, and the workers felt strong enough to prosecute the strikes while FORA V was pushing for the extension of the strikes to the revolution. Only the intervention of the army was able to reimpose social peace.

After the end of the First World War, a fall of international wool and meat prices affected the rural region of Patagonia.[9] Unemployment and the general worsening of the conditions of rural workers caused by the crisis encouraged the *Sociedad Obrera de Rio Gallegos*, affiliated to FORA IX, to call

Editor's Notes

[1] To commemorate the uprising on the 19-20 December 2001.
[2] Particularly odious Trotskyist groups.
[3] Largely French based revolutionary group that existed from 1957-1972 who appear to be a significant influence on this author. The SI developed the most incisive critique of capitalism in their time. Their most important work, Guy Debord's book, *Society of the Spectacle* is available as a pamphlet from Treason Press.Most of their writings can be found online at http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline
[4] "A multi-lingual news service by, for and about anarchists", www.ainfos.ca
[5] http://argentina.indymedia.org



The MTD is five years old, and organizes unemployed workers. MTD sections are formed by neighborhood, and activities vary by locale. Some work on providing basic goods to their neighborhoods, others work on providing education, others do marches and roadblockades. The distinguishing factor of the MTD is that it is organized horizontally, with no central control. Most MTD's are part of a coordinating group, where the different locales come together to work on certain projects. Without getting into too much detail, suffice to say that the MTD is a radical (much more so than almost any of the left parties) proletarian organization that is not controlled by any group.

Another, although much smaller, example of revolutionary tendencies is a rogue faction of the motorcycle messenger's union (the name evades me). I'm told that during the uprising last year they were constantly on the front lines, at one point charging police lines on their bikes. A number were killed during the fighting. On the 20th this year, a fight nearly broke out again as the police blocked them from joining with the MTD march (in the end the police backed down).

Politically oriented groups seem to be lagging quite behind. One group, the Situationist Collective (tracing back to the Italian autonomia, not the Situationist International[3]) has put out a few books about the uprising from a radical anti-capitalist standpoint. However, as far as I can tell they are quite ambiguious in regards to an overall analysis, and seem to have little historical analysis.

Anarchist groups here seem to be in a quagmire. I must admit that I haven't had time (or too much interest) in pursuing the various anarchist sects. As far as I know, the anarchist scene here is divided between punks and anarcho-historians on one hand, and organizationally minded anarcho-communists like the OSL (Organization of Libertarian Socialism). While the former seems entirely irrelevant (okay, maybe the punks spray paint circle A's on the walls), the OSL seems to be the only anarchist presence at demonstrations and marches.

When I first arrived, I couldn't really tell the difference between the dozen or so banners and flags of various Leninist groups, and the flags and banners saying "Libertarian Socialism." I've seen their paper once, and read a few things from A-infos[4] from them—so far nothing to indicate an orientation away from boring anachronism and coat-tailing Trotskyists. However, I will pursue them in the upcoming days in the hope that they won't fit the terrible stereotype of irrelevant sectarianism.

Finally, I will plug Indymedia in Argentina as being a good group, playing a useful role in the struggles here. While Indymedia in most places is still in the gutter, it seems that the Argentina IMC[5] is actually of use to people trying to exchange information in various different movements. The open nature means that there is a fair amount of Leninist propaganda, but the fact that there is a diversity of Leninist propaganda helps it escape from being the organ to one particular group. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of people working on the project (taking the photos, writing the articles, keeping the spaces together) are simply interested in furthering struggles like the unemployed movements, popular assemblies, and factory occupations. Another plus are the two Indymedia offices, both inside former banks that are now controlled by neighborhood assemblies

I don't really have much more to say. I would consider the 19-20th anniversary actions to be a great failure; with the left being able to prevent any sort of violent class action (through use of organizational control and widespread discouraging of violence). However, there are still many excellent things going on here, and many useful lessons to be learned from the class struggle in Argentina.

for a regional strike of ports and hotels in July 1920. The repressive response of the State triggered an escalation of the struggle, which extended among the rural workers in the hinterland. Armed nuclei composed of rural workers raided the countryside, spreading terror among the landowners and the bosses, recruiting, and propagating the struggle from *hacienda* to *hacienda*. Presidential appeals for reconciliation to the 'genuine-and-peaceful' workers were answered with armed defiance both in the coastal towns and in the countryside, and scabs sent from Buenos Aires were shot at by the workers of Rio Gallegos. Patagonia did not want a compromise, they wanted to go further: "*This is not a working-class movement*" said the governor Correo Falcon "*but something much worse*". The strike ceased first in the capital Rio Gallegos and later in the countryside in front of a total lack of support from the central FORA IX and of the promises of generous concessions by the new governor, Varela, who presented himself as a defender of workers' rights and was able to obtain an agreement with the rural workers. The promises were not met; but another attempt to organize strikes and armed struggles in 1921 was murderously repressed by the governor Varela.[10] The upsurge was over, to the relief not only of the Argentinian bourgeoisie but also of the English and the German bourgeoisies, who had appealed to the Argentinian chancery to protect their property in Patagonia.

Between 1919 and 1929 Argentina's economy recovered, real wages rose, unemployment decreased. This gave the government the economic basis for a renewed compromise with the working class. New laws to regulate the labour market were introduced (e.g. a legislation which made payment in cash obligatory came in 1925, the restriction of the working day to 8 hours, except for rural and domestic workers, came in 1929). The working class were demobilized and most of the unions merged to form the reformist confederation *Central General de Trabajadores* (CGT, 1930). Only FORA V and a few communist unions stayed out.

2. Import-substitution production and Peronism[11]

The fall of world trade that followed the end of the First World War prompted some within the Argentinian bourgeoisie to disengage with the world markets and look towards *industrialization based on import substitution.*[12] However, a concerted attempt at national industrialization required a break with the established class settlement. The emerging industrial bourgeoisie, in whose interests it was to really push for this new economic policy, was in fact weak and squeezed between the agro-trade oligarchy on the one hand, entrenched in their conservative free-trade oriented interests, and a militant and restless working class on the other. It was only with the economic crisis that followed Wall Street crash in 1929, which saw a collapse in world trade, that it became possible to break the existing class settlement and pursue a policy of import substitution led industrialization. Even then the Argentinian industrial bourgeoisie was too weak and the army had to step in.

The army overthrew the Radical government in 1930, installing a military presidency. In order to regulate overproduction caused by the international crisis, the military government placed agricultural trade under State control, against the entrenched interests of the agrarian and mercantile bourgeoisie. The monopoly of the agro-trade profits allowed the State to channel capital into the development of a modern army, and a State apparatus which favoured industrial development; and (above all later with Perón) to channel profits into productive and industrial development.

At the same time the military government acted against the working class so as to increase the profitability of industrial capital. As soon as it took power, the new governments started repressions of both militant and conciliatory unions. Despite the fact that the moderate CGT did not even condemn the military coup, declaring themselves 'politically neutral', the new government took repressive steps against the unions. The industrial bourgeoisie regained the ground previously lost to the working class. The labour

laws conceded after the insurrection of 1919 were repealed; regulations were neglected by the bosses with the approval of state authorities and during the next ten years the average wage decreased. In the same period industrial production expanded and overtook agricultural production. This was accompanied by a recomposition of the Argentinian working class: made redundant by the economic restructuring, masses of rural workers moved to the urban areas and provided the labour force for the new industries.

However, unable to find a stable form to mediate class conflict and to integrate the working class with some form of corporative compromise, the military government found itself caught between the interests of the old ruling oligarchy and rising popular discontent, and they were obliged to progressively concede power to bourgeois politicians.

In June 1943, during the Second World War, in the face of a bourgeoisie split by conflicting interests, the army, led by Generals Rawson and Ramírez, took power a second time in order to ensure Argentina maintained a neutral position in the Second World War. There was an ideological motive in the *coup*, since the right-wing army was inclined to maintain a friendly relationship with the fascist side and many among them, Perón included, openly expressed their admiration of Mussolini. In fact the military was looking at fascism and corporatism as an answer to growing working class militancy. In 1942 the number of working days lost to strikes in Argentina was three times higher than in the past two years.

Indeed, in 1943, the new Labour and Social Security Secretary, Juan Domingo Perón, started a coherent economic and political policy based on the introduction of protective tariffs to support national accumulation and industrial development and on a corporatist compromise with the industrial working class. By 1944 he had become Vice President of Argentina. His popularity with the working class became so high that when the army tried to remove him from his post and send him into internal exile in 1945, a wave of grass-root struggles spread through the country obtained his return. In 1946, he was elected President with the support of the urban working class.[13] In 1946 Perón initiated an industrialization plan, based on the income from the State monopoly of the agro-export, which would be reinvested in new industries through State-owned banks.

The introduction of protectionism and the State control of industrial development provided the material means to integrate the working class through economic concessions. And at the same time the real improvement in working class conditions, particularly higher wages, was functional to the expansion of Argentina's internal market, and to the development of the import substitution economy. Indeed, the ideology of Peronism, based on the idea of a State 'above all particular class interests', was an ideology that the Radical government of Yrigoyen (and General Uriburu, with his corporatist commitment) had tried to propose in vain because it was challenged both by the old oligarchy and the working class, and as a result was contradicted by its actual economic policies. Only with the Peronist compromise was this nationalistic 'third way' grounded in the actual role taken by the State in the control of the economy. And by allowing for a real change in the conditions of the working class it was able to secure the material basis for its credibility.

The gains of the working class were to some extent comparable to those of workers in European social-democratic countries. A bureaucratic union apparatus would represent the workers and guarantee their 'interests' within a system of collective bargaining with the state as interlocutor (the unions received the status of *persona juridica* in 1945).The centralization of wage negotiations became a feature of most trades (already in 1945 there were 142 collective bargains signed at the National Department of Labour for Buenos Aires and 279 for the rest of the country). Legislation which benefited the workers was passed, including a steady rise of wages, the introduction of an extra month bonus at

although the amount of press time given to the left is definitely one indicator. On a personal level I've noticed this from the sympathy given to leftist slogans or ideas by non-politically affiliated people.

During the December 19-20th anniversary marches[1] in Buenos Aires, these groups clearly exhibited their essence as tools of capitalist recuperation and control of the working class. The two days culminated in a rally at the Plaza de Mayo; and each of the left groups had separate marches that fed into the rally. The absurdities of the ideological buffet that composes the left here became painfully clear as different marches played juvenile games around downtown (one group would enter a square, prompting a rival to leave).

The sectarian antics sometimes bordered on the bizarre, with different factions of a march splitting it in an effort to become the lead banner. In the end, the marches finally gathered at the plaza, although a few groups elected to march around a few blocks away from the square, in an effort to avoid close proximity to rivals.

It's worth noting that each of these left groups comes to demos with their own security forces, usually armed with sticks. Some of the larger ones even had their blocs surrounded by rope, so as to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the bloc. I remember trying to get from one part of the plaza to the other, and having to contend with four or five of these barriers.

The day quickly came to an end, as each of the tedious and awful sects sent speakers up to take their shot at inciting the masses (to join this or that Leninoid group). I left after about two and a half hours of this. More than anything else, it seemed like any hope of real popular discontent had been strangled.

The situation here seems to be a nightmare of what happens when groups like the Spartacist League and the RCP[2] are able to capture large numbers of proletarians.

The negative effects that the left is having on the working class here are undeniable to any revolutionary. Each Leninist variation with half a brain has been able to put any number of absurd strategies into effect: varying from electoral politics, forming constituent assemblies, or trying to manipulate the trade unions into a general strike—all the while dragging significant numbers of poor and working people along with them.

It must also be said that despite the left's influence on proletarian struggles like the piqueteros, the fact is that many of the groups maintain a definite combative and revolutionary character. Even the left-wing of the left, groups like the Socialist Workers Party (PTS) are pursuing revolutionary direct action (the PTS is currently involved in working for the defense and expansion of worker-controlled factories).

However, overall it seems that the capitalist powers here are coming to realize that the spectacle of the left as a proletarian formation is a powerful tool to captivate and divide (sometimes quite literally as we saw at the plaza) Argentine workers. This is all the worse considering the absence of any group with a coherent set of revolutionary politics.

That is not to say that there are not revolutionary tendencies here. It seems clear to me that the most advanced tendencies here are not theoretically oriented, instead base proletarian organizations like the MTD (Unemployed Workers Movement) seem to be leading the way towards a real fight against capital.

REPORT FROM A VISITOR TO ARGENTINA

I fully believe that the uprising of last year (19-20 December 2001) was one of the most significant proletarian offensives in recent history. The uprising last year was clearly a mass movement, against capital and the state. Popular assemblies and workers control of factories are widespread phenomena; and in the case of the latter, increasing in number.

It cannot be disputed that every person in Argentina was affected in a serious way by the uprising, and the consequent emergence of popular revolutionary organizations throughout the country. Neighborhood assemblies in and around Buenos Aires easily number more than one hundred. Thousands of workers across the country are controlling the means of production. In some of the poorest areas, especially in the North, the unemployed organizations hold power that rivals that of the state.

The weakness of capital can be observed in many ways here. The bourgeois press is forced to dedicate large sections of its newspapers and airtime to focus on various problems and actions of the proletariat.

It is clear that the repressive arm of capital (the state) is widely hated, and significantly impotent to enforce the law. For example, a demonstration (explained to me as very calm comparatively) of a few hundred on 19 December 2002 ran amok in the financial district, defacing and blockading banks for several hours, attacking police vehicles, setting fires, hurling dozens of paintbombs at the stock exchange, and delaying traffic – all without any response from the police.

Buenos Aires is covered in anti-establishment graffiti. Almost every major plaza has been scrawled with messages against politicians and the rich. It seems like the government has given up on cleaning it.

However, despite all these promising signs of conditions ripe for communist revolution, I believe such a thing is far off. The key problem being the lack of coherent class consciousness on the part of Argentine proletarians.

Capital here is undoubtedly still on the defensive, and still taking serious losses a year after the initial uprising. It is commonly believed that if the state were to make serious moves towards regaining lost ground, through utilizing 70's-style tactics, a civil war would erupt.

However, while carefully shrouded, the ruling class here still wields the superior weapon which keeps the proletariat here under a false consciousness – most clearly described as the diffuse spectacle.

The diffuse nature of the Argentine spectacle is comprised of many components to keep proletarians confused and impotent. Shadows of their former selves, traditional Western spectacular activities such as television, soccer, and superfluous consumption still seem to play a significant role in life here.

However, more important is that with the economic collapse and popular uprising, the spectacular power of the left-wing of capital has seen a great increase.

The membership and base support for the dozens of left political parties or mass organizations (like front groups, but not exactly the same thing) has increased by a large margin in the past years. Even for the majority of society here, which is not tied to any specific vile ideology, the left is now in a much better position to be listened to and taken seriously. This is somewhat hard to provide evidence for,

Christmas (the *Aguinaldo*, suspended only in August 2001), the implementation of health and safety regulations, free health care and new guarantees for rural workers.

These 'generous' concessions were offered in exchange for the workers'' submission to the State and the social order. For Perón the good worker had to go *'de casa al trabajo y del trabajo a la casa'*: from home to work and from work to home - and give up class struggle. Perón's nationalistic ideology condemned communism and capitalism as 'foreign' and spurious ideologies, in the name of the 'third way' of justice and welfare provided by the Argentinian State. The Peronist party was called 'Justicialist'. The other side of this 'third way' was of course military repression, which was turned against those unions and militants who opposed the regime (the socialist splinter of the CGT union federation was suspended).

Instead, the more moderate unions were encouraged and integrated into the State structure. The unions' complicity with the corporatist state and their moderation was guaranteed *in concrete* by a redefinition of their role within the system of wealth distribution. The unions were in fact put in charge of benefit provision and they would run the health service and even holiday resorts for the workers. This control of resources was an element of *real* power and control of the individual workers based on relations of patronage.

However, the union representation found itself in a contradiction. In order to maintain their privileges which were the token for their submission to the State apparatus, the unions had to strive not to lose their control of the workers' movement; but on the other hand they had also to strive to maintain their legitimacy in face of the workers, whose militancy was growing. Indeed, contradictorily, in their efforts at recuperating the proletariat through representation, Peronism encouraged the workers to meet and participate in union activities, and to organize. Unionization was made obligatory for the state sector, and new unions promoted. The same fact that unionization was encouraged meant that while between 1940 and 1944 there were 332 strikes with a loss of one million working days, between 1945 and 1949, 392 strikes soared to a record of nine million working days. In fact, while the main union federation CGT had become a bureaucratized mechanism at the service of the government, struggles proliferated around the shop stewards and the official representatives in the factories (*comisiones internas*), escaping the control of the leaders.

With its nationalistic and militaristic ideology, and with its attempt to suppress class conflict through a state-imposed corporatism, Peronism appears strikingly similar to European fascism. However, although Perón openly sought to emulate Mussolini, and although many commentators have seen Peronism as merely a form of fascism, there were vital differences. First, Peronism did not arise out of a mass movement rooted in the despair following a decisive working class defeat. Second, in his efforts to modernize Argentina through a policy of rapid industrialization, Perón was unable to rely on the backing of a relatively strong industrial bourgeoisie in order to overcome entrenched conservative agrarian interests. Instead, as we have seen, Perón came to power with the support of the working class. Far from smashing already demoralized working class organizations, Perón was obliged to establish a *modus vivendi* with such organizations.

The fact that Perón was obliged to establish an alliance with the working class has led some commentators to suggest that Peronism was essentially a form of social democracy, or at least a cross between social democracy and fascism. However, to the extent that social democracy becomes the *representation* of the working class within the state and capital, it represents the working class as individual commodity-owner/citizens. As such, social democracy tends to lead to the demobilization of the working class and the atrophy of its self-organization.

In contrast, although Perón could maintain an iron grip at the national level, at the grass-roots level both formal and informal working class organizations and networks were not only preserved but left with a large degree of autonomy. At a national level, Perón tied the working class as a whole to Perónism through substantial material concessions, while at a local level the various local grass-roots organizations were tied to the state through a system of patronage.

This co-option and preservation of the pre-existing forms of working class self-organization was further consolidated with Perón's move towards democratization. In doing so, Perón established a system of clientelist relationships which guaranteed political and financial autonomy to the electoral base. Peronist local organizations were left totally or almost totally free from any political control on their activities. They would support their politicians at electoral times, receiving in exchange financial help and jobs. This encouraged identification with, and support for, Peronism, since such support actually meant welfare, state-guaranteed rights against the employers, and also space for militant actions and self-organization.

It is worth noticing that the Peronist structure of power, by giving a limited autonomy to its electoral base, encouraged and reproduced a traditional practice of self-help and solidarity at neighbourhood level. This tradition was rooted in the life of the pre-1920s *conventillos*, large buildings where working class families used to live (they had the structure of convents, with shared kitchens, and central *patio*).[14] Workers' cultural associations, popular libraries and anarchist schools proliferated around the *conventillos' patios*, as well as instances of organized neighbourhood-based struggles. When, by the end of the 1920s, the workers were rehoused in individual houses in the suburbs of the cities, they tried to overcome their isolation by organizing themselves in the neighbourhood (*barrio*) through social and sport clubs and cultural associations - however, as Ronaldo Munck stresses, the new social heterogeneity in the suburbs would "tend to dilute the harsh proletarian experience of the pre-1930 period".[15] This base activity was encouraged by Peronism, when welfare was provided by the union structures through a network of associations (such as recreational groups, co-ops, etc.); this situation probably reflected the weakness of a bourgeoisie which could not afford to provide the working class with a modern welfare system. The 'mafia'-like structure of Argentinian power was one side of the coin of this weakness; the failure of the Peronist 'welfare system' to fragment and individualize the working class (as was achieved instead by the western welfare state) was the other side of this same coin.

This had allowed the Argentinian working class to experience communal self-organization as a central part of its reproduction and survival, balancing the obvious pressure of capitalism towards bourgeois individualism.[16] This tradition of solidarity in the neighbourhood and at street level, which Argentinian capitalism could not afford to dismantle, was an important element in Argentina's historical insurrections. One tradition which has reoccurred from pre-Peronist times up until today is the organization of *ollas populares*, community kitchens during episodes of strikes. But above all this experience is important for its revolutionary potential – the fact that struggles which start from certain categories of workers can actually involve other proletarians and expand to whole towns.

3. The end of the import-substitution economy[17]

By the end of the 1940s, import substitution-led industrialization was reaching its limits. Concessions for the working class and its institutionalized strength restricted the rate of exploitation and hindered profits. The State apparatus necessary to Peronist patronage, with its army of white collar workers employed in the unions, hospitals, schools, etc, was a growing burden on the realization of surplus value at national level. Argentina's archaic agricultural trade, whose profits still constituted the main

things, monitor their delegates. The vote was passed with only dissention.

[60] It is perhaps in part thanks to parties such as the PO that the links between 'piquete and cacerola' were made so early – at the piquetero march from La Matanza on the 28th January 2002, when the slogan "piquete and pot banger, the struggle is the same" was born, the assembly which first greeted the *piqueteros* and gave them breakfast was that of Villa Urquiza, which has a large PO participation.

[61] This and previous from "La izquierda argentina y las asambleas barriales, divididas", Raúl Zibechi, May 6 2002. At http://www.rebelion.org/sociales/zibechi060502.htm

[62] *Echanges*, p.39.



Some proletarians set out to smash the Argentine state.

and now with links to various Trotskyist parties; the MTL (Territorial Liberation Movement), a small group linked to the Communist Party; Agrupación Tendencia Clasista 29 de Mayo (29th May Classist Tendency Grouping), of the Liberation Party.

[34] "Blocking of access to the Federal Capital", by MTD Anibal Verón, 22 November 2001.

[35] "The unemployed Workers Movement in Argentina", James Petras.

[36] "Origen y evolución de los *"piqueteros"*", Julio Burdman.

[37] A bourgeoisie in the periphery of capital which makes its money by hanging around with western capitalist interests, taking a cut from the deals made to exploit the country's resources, and therefore having no interest in national development.

[38] "El bloque piquetero marchó en La Plata", from the weekly newspaper *Argentina Arde*, No.8 April 11 2002, p.3.

[39] "Ni un peso, ni un soldado", *Argentina Arde*, No.7 March 22 2002, p.3.

[40] *Mouvement Communist* p.17-18.

[41] Asamblea Parque Lezarna Sur, 5.2.02.

[42] Letter from Raúl Godoy, General Secretary of the Union of Ceramist Workers and Employees of Neuquén (SOECN), Neuquén, Argentina, November 16 2001, published on Indymedia.

[43] "Trabaja y vende", *Argentina Arde* #8, 11th April 2002, p5

[44] *Echanges*, p.45.

[45] Email to *Aufheben*, 9.9.02.

[46] p.6 *Mouvement Communiste* 'Letter' #1, Feb.2002.

[47] After the devaluation of the peso, average middle class incomes amounted to just 75% of former *working class* salaries. The income of bank employees in the capital has fallen by 60% from US$1081 to US$432 a month, without allowing for the rapidly rising prices of everything.

[48] *Echanges* p.14.

[49] See pages pp.26-32.

[50] ibid. p.13.

[51] Full story on the Argentina Now website at http://argentinanow.tripod.com.ar/news.html

[52] "A otro perro con ese hueso", *Argentina Arde*, No.8 April 11 2002, p.8.

[53] "Los remedies en su lugar", *Argentina Arde*, No.8 April 11 2002, p.8.

[54] "Apuntes" p.126.

[55] *Echanges*, p.33.

[56] "Seeds of Revolution" in *Freedom* 23.3.02, vol.63. No.6. p.3.

[57] *Argentina Arde*, No.8 April 11 2002, p.8.

[58] The debate was also connected to the problems in many neighbourhood assemblies that the participation of left party activists were causing – although in the first *cacerolazos* and demonstrations organised by the assemblies, party banner were so frowned upon as to be absent, over time, more and more party banners began to appear

[59] One of the big splits occurred over proposals for Mayday demonstrations. One proposal was to join the mass demo, the other being for a separate, mass meeting at the obelisk. Partido Obrero and MST militants actually had a punch up over the issue, whilst 24 of the 57 assemblies attending that day abstained from voting over the issue. At the following interbarrial of the 28th April, the assembly of Liniers denounced the crisis of the Interbarrial, "provoked by a process of demobilisation of the neighbourhood assemblies and because of the partisan practices of two organisations in particular, who have brought their partisan struggles to the heart of this incipient organism which the neighbours, with much effort, are constructing." They proposed that each assembly should, finally, have one speaker and one vote, although as many *asambleistas* as possible should continue to attend to, amongst other

source of finance for the State, and which were challenged by competition from more advanced western countries, began to impose increasingly pressing limits on the Peronist system. As a consequence, inflation began to rise and real wages declined. A mounting petty bourgeois, middle-class and bourgeois opposition to Peronism emerged, politically articulated by the Catholic Church and by increasingly nervous associations of industry bosses.

It was increasingly apparent that Peronist power could survive only by changing the terms of its 'compromise': In order to deal with the increasing State deficit, Perón had to seek foreign investments, and in order to contain inflation had to discipline the working class. Already by 1948, the government responded to strikes with repression more frequently than by making concessions. In 1953 Perón had to abandon his commitment to his flagship policy of protectionism: causing outrage in public opinion, he allowed the USA to invest in a new a steel plant, and started negotiations with the California-based Standard Oil Company for the exploitation of oil sources in Patagonia. All this weakened both the ideological and the material basis of the Peronist class compromise.

In fact a change at international level in the post-war settlement presented Argentina with the opportunity to shift towards export-led industrialization. The Bretton Woods agreement, together with multilateral agreements promoting free trade, established the dollar as world currency and stimulated a sustained recovery in world trade. Argentina's bourgeoisie could now in principle take advantage of an opening up of foreign markets, particularly in the USA and in Europe, to sell the products it could now manufacture. The governments which succeeded Perón's would make increasing efforts towards liberalization. But there was a fundamental problem confronting the attempts to pursue export-led growth. The industry developed under the Peronist compromise was backward and inefficient by world standards. Argentinian industry needed massive investment to be able to compete on the world market, and this could only come from abroad. But Western banks were not prepared to make the large scale and long term investments in Argentina necessary to modernize its plant and machinery while the post-war boom was generating high profits in the Western countries.

However, the need to attract foreign investment and to discipline the working class into better standards of efficiency, faster work pace, higher intensity of work, meant that the bourgeoisie had to get rid of Perón and attack the privileges of a 'spoiled' working class. In September 1955 a military *coup* replaced Perón, populistically playing also on the disappointment of the public opinion about the deals with Standard Oil. The aim of the new military government was first of all to redefine the balance of power between employers and workers, since, according to the employers' federation of the metallurgical industry, workplaces were "like an army in which the troops give the orders and not the generals".[18] In the years following the *coup*, anti-labour laws were passed; the base structures of the Peronist unions, the *comisiones internas*, were subjected to State intervention or forced into clandestinity. In 1958 the Radical government led by Frondizi implemented a series of privatizations and rationalizations, to patch up the State finances and encourage foreign investment. After 1958 production was restructured sometimes with the introduction of new technology; but often the effort of increasing productivity just meant imposing a faster work pace and discipline on the workers.

There was a strong grass-root workers' response to the new economic measures. Between 1955 and 1959 about four million working days were lost every year to strikes. In 1959 the days lost to strikes soared to ten million. The workers did not hesitate to consider occupations, sabotage and the use of explosives. Despite this resistance, the bourgeoisie recovered ground. Wage concessions were related to productivity; piece-work was introduced; speed-ups were imposed. It was a period of defeat for the class, paradoxically amidst a level of struggles which we may only envy today in the UK.

At the end of the 50s, however, a peak in militant factory occupations and strikes encouraged the CGT to get involved, both to control this militancy and to use it for achieving more political and negotiation power. With Augusto Vandor as leader, the CGT made every effort to minimize grass-roots influence on the assemblies with the use of intimidation by stewards and impose a total control of the struggles from the top. The workers' energies were channelled into 'controlled struggles', controlled in every detail by the union leaders, which were aimed to gain concessions for the union's power and for the workers, but also to weaken the Radical government and pave the way for a return of Perón. In particular, in 1964 a 'controlled' series of factory occupations involved eleven thousand factories and four million workers.[19]

Amidst growing social tension, a students' struggle swept the country in 1966. A new military regime took power the same year and smashed the movement, but it could not stop the process of politicization in universities which had started with it. The student's radicalization and their involvement with the workers' struggles would in fact be an important element in the later insurrectional events of 1969.

The new military government, led by General Onganía, initially presented itself as ideologically corporatist and its *coup* was welcomed by most of the unions. But in 1967 the government's economic policies shifted towards liberalization and rationalization , adopting anti-inflationary policies which led to the collapse of uncompetitive businesses, reducing barriers for the entry of foreign capital, and cutting the power and the resources of the CGT. However, a general strike called by the CGT for March 1967 met a cold response from many unions. In 1968 the CGT regrouped in a moderate CGT *Azopardo* and a more militant, and only initially large, CGTA ('of the Argentinians'), created by base militants, and involving Stalinists, left-wing Peronists, left-wing Catholics, and groups of the far left.

From 1968 however the workers rose up again in a *crescendo* of strikes which culminated with major insurrectional events in 1969, the *Cordobazo*. Tension in the industrial town of Córdoba built up mainly around the issues of the abolition of the five-day working week and the establishment of *quitas zonales*, regions where the bosses were allowed pay less than the wage nationally agreed, which included the region of Córdoba. The metal mechanical workers, the bus drivers and the car mechanics, and their respective unions UOM, UTA and SMATA were mainly at the centre of these struggles. The immediate trigger for the insurrection was a series of protests after murderous police repression of student struggles. On the 29th May in Córdoba a march organized by SMATA, *Luz y Fuerza* (the local power workers union), UOM and UTA, joined by white collar workers and by students, soon transformed itself into a battle on the barricades. The whole town was on the streets and the centre was seized for many hours. But the day after the army counterattacked, numerous arrests were made, and militants were killed. In September a new insurrection exploded in the town of Rosario, in the Córdoba region; the town was seized and defended on the barricades against the police. Police headquarters, banks, shops and hotels in the city centre were raided.

The insurrections were heavily repressed, but the State had to restore collective bargaining with the unions and moderate their new economic policies. The participation of white-collar workers in the *Cordobazo* was the first major instance of participation of this sector on the barricades. With the cuts in the state services, the participation of dissatisfied white-collar workers in the proletarian struggle was to become increasingly frequent: the *piquetero* movement of 1995 emerged precisely from a combative struggle of teachers. The *Cordobazo* is also another example, rooted in the Argentinian tradition, of a struggle which does not stop at the factory gate but spreads throughout the town – a tradition which has become very important in today's movement.

[22] Sources for this section: Ronaldo Munck, "Argentina", *Capital & Class* No.22 Spring 1984, p.15; Martha Roldán, "Continuities and Discontinuities in the Regulation and Hierachization of the World Automotive Industry", http://www.univ_evry.fr/labos/gerpisa/actes/20/article4.html; Andy Beckett "Blueprint for Britain" *The Guardian Weekend,* May 4 2002 p.17; Arthur P. Whitaker, *Argentina Upheaval,* London: Atlantic Press, p.97, p.100, p.109.

[23] Sources for this section: Donald G. Richard, "Regional Integration and Class Conflict: MERCOSUR and the Argentine Labour Movement", *Capital & Class* No.57, Autumn 1995, p. 55; Martha Roldán, op.cit.; Hernán Camarero, Pablo Pozzi, Alejandro Schneider "Unrest and Repression in Argentina", *New Politics* vol. 7, no.1 (new series), Summer 1998; Gerard Baker "US defends its stance on Argentina" and Thomas Catán "European countries protest at Argentina recovery plan", *Financial Times* 7/1/02; articles in *Financial Times* 22/12/01; Institudo de Estudio y Formación, *Highlights of Labour Market Conditions in Argentina,* Global Policy Network, http://www.globalpolicynetwork.org.

[24] After the Second World War the USA had emerged as the unrivalled economic super-power. Since the US could out-compete all its potential competitors in all the most important industries it was in the interests of American capital to promote free trade and liberalisation. However although the USA sought to promote the free movement of capital and commodities, and endeavoured to break up the old European empires and their associated special trading relationships, such policies were always tempered by the need to contain the Eastern Bloc. As a result the USA was prepared to tolerate allied countries imposing policies of national development, even though such policies may have inhibited the profitability of US capital, insofar as such policies prevented the spread of' 'Communism'. With the fall of the USSR such a constraint on the USA's insistence on liberalization was lifted.

[25] Between 1991 and 1998 the trade between the four countries making up MERCOSUR quadrupled. However, with the crisis of 1998-9, which saw Brazil devalue the Real by 40%, MERCOSUR began to unravel. Between 1999 and 2001 the trade between the four countries fell. As Argentina's trade deficit continued to rise, exacerbated by a further 30% devaluation of the Real, it was agreed to temporarily suspend the MERCOSUR customs union in March 2001.

[26] The role of the IMF in this desperate situation, again, was primarily that of defending the interests of the creditors. One of the main policies imposed by the IMF on the developing countries was that of financial liberalization, the removal of restrictions on the movement of capital in and out of the countries. In the latest hectic years, when it was clear that the peso would collapse, financial companies (for example Citibank) and individual creditors rushed to take dollars out of the country. In order to stop this movement, Argentina's authorities employed a 'Law of Economic Subversion', previously designed to track financial movements related to terrorism; but the IMF put pressure on the government to cancel this law.

[27] "The unemployed Workers Movement in Argentina", James Petras, January 2002 *The Monthly Review*. Vol.53 No.8. URL??

[28] Since devaluation from one to one with the dollar, the peso has fallen to around 3.6 to the dollar, but 'bonds', or parallel currencies are more and more replacing the peso – the peso is becoming scarce – with around 6 billion Lecops in circulation.

[29] "L'Argentine de la pauperization a la revolt. Une avance vers l'autonomie." *Echanges et Mouvement.* June 2002.

[30] See *Echanges* pp.13-14.

[31] Which is part of the *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA, Argentine Workers Central), a large union confederation.

[32] "Movilizacíon popular, silencio sindical."

[33] These are: Movimiento Sin Trabajo Teresa Vive, linked to the Trotskyist MST (Movement of Socialist Workers); the MIJP (Independent Movement of Pensioners and Retired people) – ex CCC

[11] Sources for this section: Ronaldo Munck, op.cit. pp.106-146; Confederation National du Travail op.cit. pp.29-30.

[12] That is, substituting the import of goods with national production oriented to sell on the internal market. This implied a major restructuring of the Argentinian economy.

[13] Ronaldo Munck argues against the 'orthodox' interpretation of Peronism as based on a new working class who had recently moved from the countryside, and who was less class conscious, more traditionalist and were thus prone to accept an authoritarian State. According to studies quoted by Munck, "the organization's and leaders of the 'old' working class participated intensely in the rise of Peronism" and, contrary, to the theories of the separation between new and old workers, the Argentinean working class was "remarkably homogeneous". See discussion in Ronaldo Munck, pp.121-123). If the 'orthodox' theory on Peronism might make sense at the ideological level it is difficult to explain the strength of the Argentinian working class under Peronism without taking into account the existence of a "remarkable unity" of the working class.

[14] The *Conventillos* are now used as hostels for very poor people.

[15] Op.cit. p.231.

[16] Individual*ism* is a one-sided ideological viewpoint within capitalist social relations, where social interaction among producers takes the form of the social relationship of their commodities on the market. The viewpoint of our society as a civil society based on *free* individuals is of course ideological, being one-sided, because it hides the fact that the real personal freedom and happiness of the producers is denied by the alienation and exploitation inherent in wage labour and in market relationships. Obviously the other side of the same ideology is the integration of the fragmented individuals within the system through identification with *abstract* communities, centred around unifying issues such as nationalism, the bourgeois party, etc. The fact that individualism and collectivism are contradictory may tempt us to oppose the first by appealing to the second one or *vice versa*. But this approach would fail to grasp the problem dialectically and see the common root of both ideological standpoints in the concrete bourgeois relationships within capitalism. Only with the concrete challenge to commodity relations in the practice of class struggle both individualism (the denial of *real* happiness and freedom) and abstract collectivism (the denial of *real* collective management of our lives) will lose their compensatory attractions and their reason for being.

[17] Sources for this section: Munck op.cit. pp.127-228.

[18] Ronaldo Munck, op.cit. p.150.

[19] As accounted by Ronaldo Munck, op.cit. p. 158.

[20] *Mouvement Communist* gives us a list of names of union bureaucrats and their businesses in the 70s. Some of them are: Marcelino Mansilla, general secretary of UOCRA of' Mar de Plata, who owned night-clubs, a textile factory and a restaurant. The brothers Elorza, secretaries of the union of hoteliers, had a restaurant. Triacca, bureaucrat in the plastics union, owned a pig farm and a transport company. Lorenzo Miguel, secretary of UOM, was co-director of another transport company. Armando March, secretary of the union of the commercial employees was a director of a 'union' bank. Regelio Coria, leader of UOCRA, co-owned the building materials factory FUCON and had a huge farm in Paraguay...

[21] As *Mouvement Communiste* explain, the 'guerrilla' movement started in Argentina in 1955 with the *Movimento Revolucionario Peronist* (MRP), which split into a right-wing and a left-wing faction. After the student struggles of 1966, and the struggles against the military, regime of Ongania, encouraged also by 'theology of liberation', more numerous groups appeared in the 70's (there were Peronist, Catholic, Guevarist, Trotskyist, Maoist factions). The *Montoneros* came out in 1970, with a mixture of Peronist, nationalist and third-worldist ideology. In 1974 they had 100000 members, with 3500-5000 cadres.

During the Peronist period, the unions' 'corruption' had been for the workers a comfortable means of obtaining benefits within a clientelist relation while as a by-product part of the State finances were redirected to the pockets of union bureaucrats. But with the political and economic reorientation of the ruling class, the bureaucratic union 'corruption' and their collaboration with a system, which was no longer generous, became a reason for resentment on the part of the working class. That the union was part of the bourgeois system was indeed apparent in the fact that the union bureaucrats were even owners of industries and businesses.[20] The movement of *clasismo* which started in 1970 with the rank-and-file struggles in the Fiat factory in Córdoba expressed this resentment. The unions of SITRAC and SIMAC were seized by the workers, who imposed rank-and-file leaders (mainly Maoist or independent Peronists), against the resistance of the union bureaucrats and of the State. A new insurrection in Córdoba, called the *Viborazo*, exploded in 1971 precisely around the new rank-and-file movements and in particular around a struggle in the FIAT car factory.

This hot climate, which also included raids by Peronist and Trotskyist terrorist groups ('guerrillas'), could not be defeated with the army or with the help of right-wing paramilitary groups. The return of Perón, who could still be seen by many as 'above the parties', was then accepted by the bourgeoisie: the Peronist Cámpora was elected in March 1973, and Perón was president later the same year. During this period strikes broke out everywhere in the country, with occupations, clashes with the police and raids on bosses' homes. 'Guerrilla' actions also multiplied.

While allowing a rise in wages, and making an attempt to control import prices, Perón carried on a policy in the three years of his power which was systematically and mercilessly repressive; he criticized Cámpora for his 'excessive concessions' to the workers. A redundancy law allowed the State to get rid of militant employees and a new 'Law of Professional Associations' allowed the trade union leaders to overthrow decisions made by the committees and increased the bureaucrats' control over the shop floor. Isabelita Perón came to power after her husband's death, and prosecuted his repressive policy. The repression had the consequence of isolating and radicalizing small vanguard groups – armed 'guerrilla' groups, in particular the *Montoneros*, got stronger and their kidnappings and murders of trade union bureaucrats and other members of the bourgeoisie earned general public support and sympathy.[21]

4. Petrodollars and the restructuring of the working class.[22]

The quadrupling of the price of oil in 1973 precipitated a severe financial crisis in Argentina. The sharp rise in the price of oil triggered an inflationary spiral that soon led to hyper-inflation. At the same time the Central Bank sank deeper into the red. Yet this oil crisis not only brought the dangers of debt and hyper-inflation, it also offered the Argentinian bourgeoisie new opportunities. The oil price rise of 1973 led to a huge increase in the revenues of the oil producing States. Unable to spend or invest more than a small fraction of these revenues at home, the oil producing States deposited their 'petro-dollars' in Western banks. As a result Western bankers found themselves awash with money-capital to invest. Faced with rising working class militancy and declining profits in Western Europe and the USA in the 1970s, the Western banks were prepared to channel a large part of their petro-dollar funds into the more developed parts of the periphery of the world economy, such as Latin America. As a consequence, the oil crisis gave Argentina's economy the opportunity to present itself as a profitable place for the Western banks to invest their petrodollars. Foreign investments could then ideally be used to modernize Argentina's industry and economic infrastructure so that it could compete in the world market. But such a strategy required a further concerted attack on the working class to guarantee the potential profitability of investments in Argentina.

Similar calculations were made in neighbouring Chile, when in 1973 a military *coup d'état* opened their doors to the 'monetarism' of the new bourgeois economists, educated in the 'Chicago school' of Milton Friedman. The prescription of the American 'monetarist' economists was to fight inflation by cutting state spending and privatize state enterprises; and abolish protectionist policies and subsidies for state industries, forcing the 'inefficient' industries to close down in the face of international competition. In 1974 the average Chilean wage fell by one half and unemployment exploded, while the welfare system, which was based on the profits of the national industries, collapsed. At the same time massive military repression hit Chilean workers and their organization s. In a word, the restructuring devised by the Chicago School was a class counterattack, whose rationale was founded in the imposition of the 'hard laws' of international competition.

In 1976, using the justification of the need to fight the 'guerrillas', the army took power in Argentina in a coup. The concept of 'guerrilla' was extended to that of 'industrial guerrilla' to launch a massive attack against workers' organization s. Indeed it was clear to the military that the main obstacle to restructuring was the proletariat. A wave of arrests and murders of militant workers and union leaders was carried out with the collaboration of paramilitary groups. A period of terror started. Militant workers would be sacked or resign for fear of arrest, torture and death, with a total of 30,000 dead or 'disappeared'. Laws were passed to attack the militancy of the rank-and-file (reduction of the number of shop stewards to half; limitations to the access to the role of shop steward in the unions, the obligation of a pre-approved agenda at union meetings).

The CGT was dissolved by the military regime, and legislation was passed to 'democratize' the unions. The right of collective bargaining was restricted to weaken the power and legitimacy of the unions. Their control on welfare and resources was withdrawn. The interest of the military to 'democratize' the unions was one with the attempt to break down their power based on patronage, and in the same time to make the workers look at the State as individuals for their benefits rather than seeking to belong to a group. But this attack on the unions had contradictory consequences. First, by losing the concrete basis for their power over people, the unions would cease to be an efficient form of social control of the proletariat. And, second, losing their privileges, which were the reason of their complicity with the government, many union leaders did not have any choice but to be drawn into the struggle and radicalized their position in an attempt at maintaining control of the situation.

However, this restructuring and liberalization of the economy had to be gradual, because of the backwardness of Argentina's industries in terms of technology and organization of work, which was the other side of the coin of the strength of a working class which had not allowed capitalism completely to follow its laws of free competition. Indeed when the State spoke about efficiency, it was the strength of the working class that was under discussion. The industries doomed by the neoliberal policies would be precisely those where the workers were stronger and had been able to gain and maintain high wages and comfortable working conditions. The restructuring meant dismantling those industrial sectors which, not uncoincidentally, were the strongholds of workers' militancy. The industries which would survive had to be competitive to face foreign competition, and the workers had to be efficient to face the pressure of a rising unemployment – this meant imposing labour discipline and speed ups on the workers, the reimposition of capital's control on labour. The introduction of wage differentials was a way of encouraging efficiency and competitiveness in the workers, and at the same time a way of trying to break class solidarity in the workplace.

As in Chile, while productivity increased, wages were halved in the first year of the *coup*. Unemployment rose and the gap between rich and poor increased. In the years following the *coup* a third of Argentina's industrial capacity was closed down in the face of foreign competition. A large part of the redundant

very possibility, burying once and for all the fear and silence of the years of the dictatorship in this huge collective affirmation.

Unable to impose the policies deemed necessary for the resolution of the crisis, the Argentinian bourgeoisie face an implacable international capital organized through the IMF. The crisis in Argentina has demonstrated the limits of the neo-liberal policies imposed through the IMF over the past two decades. By making a few rich while impoverishing ever greater numbers, these policies have undermined the social conditions necessary for economic and political stability. Neo-liberal policies are pushing more and more countries in the periphery into the same predicament, particularly in South America. However, with the world economy entering into recession, the IMF cannot afford to back down. If the Argentinian bourgeoisie is let off the hook then Brazil, Turkey, Nigeria and many others will be next. It will be the end of neo-liberalism. However, if Argentina explodes in a revolution – one which could be contagious given the rise in struggles in Latin America – America may have to intervene. But, given the fact that America is having to defend the neo-liberal world order in the Middle East at the moment, will it be stretched by its over-commitment on the world stage?

Notes

[1] The *piqueteros* being the movement based around the unemployed which uses road blocking pickets as their tactic of struggle.

[2] For details on the *piqueteros* see later

[3] For one account of the uprising, and other reports and information, see SchNews issue #350, online at http://schnews.org.uk/archive/news35.htm

[4] The slogan is still regularly heard on the streets of the cities; rarely chanted it is almost always sung, over and over – "Ohhh, que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo, que se vayan todos…", ("out with them all every single one of them").

[5] Sources for this section: Ronaldo Munck. Ricardo Falcón and Bernardo Galitelli, *Argentina, From Anarchism to Peronism*, London: Zed Books Ltd. 1987 pp.24-105; Confederation Nationale du Travail – Association Internationales des Travailleurs. *La Fora dans le Mouvement Syndical Argentin*, Marseille, 2002, pp.17-20, 25-30; Communism no.4, *Working Class Report 1917-1921. Generalised Revolutionary Struggle in Patagonia*, http://www.geocities.com/Paris/6368/communism/c4_patagonia.htm. A good source which was considered throughout the article is Mouvement Communiste *Argentine: La Cohesion Sociale Vole en Eclats*, N.1 Février 2002, B.O. 1666, Centre Monnaie, Bruxelles; http://argentinanow.tripod.com.ar/news.html.

[6] The strength of the proletariat was an important element for the power balance of the ruling class. In fact Ronaldo Munck (op.cit. p.57) stresses the importance of the general strike of 1910 for this political change, which happened two years later.

[7] Notice that the decision of bending towards the moderate socialists did not make FORA admittedly 'socialist'. In fact, due to radically divergent questions of principles, the socialist unions were united in a different federation, the UGT *(Union General de Trabajadores*, founded in 1906), and did not join FORA. All the moderate unions joined together only in 1930 to form the CGT, as we will see later.

[8] As quoted by Munck (op.cit. p.67).

[9] It is worth saying that the struggles of 1919-20 in Patagonia involved also Chilean Patagonia, where for example the Chilean workers were able to seize the town of Puerto Natale for more than a year. The efforts of FORA V to link the workers in struggle across the boundary were boycotted by FORA IX.

[10] The repression led by Varela was a real massacre, where more than 1500 workers were killed.

problem for the dictatorship which followed (and which actually demanded Peron's return). Later we see Peronist base organizations re-asserting themselves by default under Menem as an unofficial sector which would cushion the effects of reform. At this point, these networks actually assisted in dismantling the very clientelist network that connected them to the state and under the period of industrial development were in a sense the guarantee of their survival. The loose associations now in place around *piquetero* groups and assemblies have a less mediated relationship to the state than they had with Peronist clientelism. In attacking clientelist waste in the state, De La Rua, for example, attempts to outflank the Peronist clientelist channels in local government by giving out 'work plans' to the unemployed through NGOs. Now these have effectively merged with *piquetero* organizing. This means that the informal channels of co-operation and neighbourhood provision are now freed of clientelist mediation and its distortions. Autonomous groups like *Anibal Veron* can work collectively in a way impossible before. They face a weak state directly and try to get what money they can out of it, disrupting the accumulation of capital without recuperating counterweights.

However, we must be careful not to fetishize the high points of the Argentinian movement to the detriment of a more sober, wider perspective. Although the struggles have involved hundreds of thousands of people, there are millions who are not involved. How are we to consider this 'silent majority'? No doubt many of them are sympathetic with much of the mobilizations, and may be involved, at one remove; some may have fallen into despair and the atomization of a war of all against all of survival on the streets; whilst others, maybe partly as a reaction to the threat they feel from this group, are fearful of the chaos that surrounds them. On the one hand, it's the inertia of this silent majority which is the ultimate limit of the movement; but, on the other, their indecision is a block to the bourgeoisie resolving the crisis in their favour.

One way of looking at the development of the current situation in Argentina is to consider the events that led up to the calling of elections. There were two huge, country-wide *piquetero* days of action in May, with hundreds of roads blocked. Duhalde, trying to convince the IMF that he could keep his house in order, announced that the *piquetero* blockages could be tolerated no longer. Soon after, and presumably not by chance, the police attacked a *piquetero* action on the outskirts of Buenos Aires with live ammunition, injuring 30 and killing two. But the response was immediate, the Plaza de Mayo filled up in protest; 50 000 were there by the third day. Duhalde had no credibility in general and could not impose the violent will of the state because of the alertness of the mobilization. He then called the elections. This might be a dubious strategy for the bourgeoisie, as it might put the seal on the rejection of politics that has been such a strong feature of the movements, expressed as a massive abstention rate and/or spoilt vote. According to a poll in *Pagina 12* newspaper, 71% of people thought that, whoever wins the elections, little or nothing would change.

If these democratic channels fail, the apparently obvious option for the bourgeoisie is the return of military dictatorship and terror. However, terror is never so simple as it might appear. Proletarians are not always the mere victims of it. The army in a country like Argentina was one of the essential lynchpins of the state development programmes which now belong to the past. Soldiers are closer to the working class than the cops; they have to be convinced that they are fighting for the people, not simply coerced into killing, otherwise the weapons put in their hands could suddenly turn into the weapons of the revolution. The army comes in with a new social settlement. If it can't, it may not be able to guarantee the loyalty of its soldiers. The problem with the restructuring is that it attacks unproductive capital and the state – in other words, sectors like the army; the Argentinian army is now much reduced in size. One officer was quoted as not being certain enough of the loyalty of his troops to consider an intervention. We must remember at this point that Argentinians feel that the events of the 19th of December – the most generalized and spontaneous mobilization – was a repudiation of this

workforce was absorbed by self-employment in the tertiary sector, but in 1981 the government was obliged to admit that forty per cent of the working population was under-employed, and in 1982 they had to introduce unemployment benefit. With the restriction of the state sector, between 1976 and 1980 half a million white collar workers employed in the state sector were also made redundant, contributing to a split in the middle class support for the state.

But Argentinians were not willing to accept their fate of starvation and submission. Even in a situation of repression which obliged the leaders not to come out openly, even if repression and economic blackmail would tend to fragment them, Argentinians continued their struggles. From 1976 there were hundreds of thousand of workers on strike every year and a general strike in 1979. After 1979 struggles intensified while the unions were unable to contain the grass-root activity. In 1980 the government and bosses of Argentina faced street protests and a solid general strike in Buenos Aires.

The middle class support for the military regime was severely undermined by the beginning of the 80s, with a new economic crisis provoked by the second oil prices surge in 1979 and the subsequent recession in the developed economies, which caused a widespread debt crisis (Mexico defaulted in 1982). Facing workers' resistance to their best efforts towards 'efficiency', and facing falling demand for its exports in the West, Argentina's economy confronted a growing balance of trade deficit and a mounting foreign debt to finance it. Foreign debt rocketed from about $8bn in the mid-seventies to $45bn in the mid-eighties. Unrest spread, as far as the army and even in the police, which came out on strike for wages in 1982. The government, seeking a desperate way to regain their support, invaded the British colony of the Falklands/Malvinas to inflame Argentinian nationalistic hearts and obtain the support of left-wing workers' organization s (which they obtained, in the name of the leftist ideology of 'anti-imperialism'!). Unfortunately for them, they lost the war.

5. Democracy[23]

For the middle classes the fact that there was a problem in Argentina was undeniable. But this was not seen to be due to *capitalism*, but to moral issues which were superimposed on it – like the brutality of the military regime. Furthermore the crisis was not seen as a question of class struggle, but as the problem of the corrupt 'trade union barons' who were asking *too much*. In fact, this perception became the bourgeoisie's pretext for its need to carry on and intensify its attack against a working class reluctant to be sacked and sacrificed at the altar of the new monetarist and neo-liberal policies – as was expressed in the Radical Alfonsín's electoral pledge to 'clip the wings of the trade union barons', and to deal with the problem of 'uncontrolled union demands'. Alfonsín triumphantly won the elections in 1983 with the support of the middle classes and the petit bourgeoisie but soon faced the problems of recession and inflation by prosecuting the neoliberal policies of his predecessors. In 1987 the Radical government restricted wages to fight inflation and it introduced a second currency, the *austral*, a move which did not solve the inflationary crisis. Between 1983 and 1989 the wages of State employees were substantially reduced, while discontent and strikes grew. Unable to stop inflation, Alfonsín resigned in 1990.

In the same year the Peronist Menem was elected as president of Argentina in the midst of the economic crisis, with the electoral promise to stabilize the economy, devalue the peso, increase wages, and provide 'social justice' (words which appealed to the memory of the old Peronist times). On the other hand, he assured the USA of his commitment to neo-liberal policies: With this commitment, the magic word 'justice', key word of the old Peronist class compromise, was deprived of any chance of a concrete backup.

In fact there was no choice for Menem.[24] During the 1990s the International Monetary Fund intervened in Argentina in order to bail the country out of the debts that it had been piling up since the dismantling of the import-substitution economy. The enormous loans that were conceded to Argentina were conditional on the adoption of concrete steps ('Structural Adjustment Programmes') whose stated aim was to guarantee the influx of foreign capital to enable Argentina to pay back its international creditors. In order to make Argentina attractive to investors, the IMF recommended the stabilization of the Argentinian currency with respect to the dollar, a rise in interest rates and continuation of the process of privatization of state companies (water, gas, airports...) – together with further cuts in State spending. Whatever the Peronist promises might have meant to the electors, Menem had to be subservient to the IMF's requirements. Under Menem the *austral*, which was then worth one ten-thousandth of a peso, was suppressed, and a different monetary strategy was taken. In 1991, the government passed the 'Convertibility Law', which fixed the ratio between peso and dollar to 1:1. New laws on state reform sanctioned more deregulation of the economy, the privatization of gas, water, telecommunications and the postal service. The government also removed all restrictions on the transfer of foreign capital in or out of the country.

Menem dealt with economic 'inefficiency' with a reformulation of labour laws, which allowed the extension of the working day to 12 hours with no overtime paid, the possibility for employers to postpone weekend and rest days at will, deprived women and young people of labour rights (e.g. protection against dismissal), took away the right to paid days off and to strike and gave the employers the right to define job descriptions to allow for introduction of multiple tasks. This practice heavily restricted those collective negotiations which still survived and rendered the workers more atomized and weaker in their bargaining with the employers. Industries, above all textiles, were allowed to relocate from the coastal towns to inland, where there was a *'more tranquil labour environment''*, and where labour regulations were less restrictive, with the conscious intent of making the country more attractive for investment.

Under this neo-Peronist government the exposure of Argentina to international competition was speeded up. In 1990 the government signed bilateral agreements (the Act of Buenos Aires) with Brazil that aimed to establish a new trade bloc modelled on the European Union. The following year Uruguay and Paraguay joined this agreement with the treaty of Asuncion which established the *Mercado Comun del Cono Sur* (MERCOSUR). Under these agreements it was decided to establish a custom union between the four countries by January 1995. All tariff barriers were to be dismantled between the four countries exposing Argentina's industry to the full competition of Brazil.[25] However, Menem's policy of a highly restrictive monetary policy to counter inflation meant that capital was unavailable for the medium and small companies to prepare themselves for liberalization. The weakest industries were closing while capitals were concentrated into large Transnational Corporations and domestic 'Great Economic Groups'.

By 1993 Menem's neo-liberal policies had begun to bear fruit. This dismantling of financial regulations, along with tough anti-labour laws, wholesale privatization and the pegging of the peso to the dollar, had transformed Argentina into an enticing prospect for foreign investors. With diminished investment opportunities due to the recession in the USA and Europe, international capital flooded into Argentina, preying on the national services, land, natural resources (oil) sold off by the government. The government of Argentina was duly praised by the IMF and the USA

In contrast to the period under Alfonsín, in which the incomes of all but the very rich failed to keep pace with hyper-inflation, Menem's rule was a time of relative prosperity for the majority of the Argentinian population. With the stabilization of the peso the middle class no longer had to fear

who go to the supermarket to buy goods to take to the '*trueque*', and exchange for other things or services that are worth more than they paid. And anyone who has no money or goods has no choice but to offer services, or in other words: sell their labour power – a well known model...I have even heard that capitalist frauds have reached the *clubes del trueque*, that there are forgeries of the credits which are the currency. And in the relation between people, there is little difference from the capitalist model. Each person appears as an individual to sell/exchange their things or services.' We can compare this form of relation based on survival needs to the more interesting actions of assemblies and *piqueteros* described above which organise survival in a way which relies on collectivity and solidarity. The barter clubs are a largely 'middle class' phenomenon, but the quote above also suggests the subtle stratifications within the 'middle class' – with some impoverished and trying to converge their stock of belongings into cash to survive, and others maybe on the skids but being able to turn a profit because of greater liquidity. As a corrective to this view, *Echanges* feel we must keep in mind that this form of exchange may also take a more spontaneous, un-commodified form as the neighbourly exchange of needs based practically on skill, time etc without these necessarily being measured and equalised.[62] A – "would you look after my kids tomorrow if I fix your sink on Tuesday" – can be proposed spontaneously and goes on the one hand towards creating social links between neighbours, but on the other will have a tendency to formalise. In a situation like Argentina there is going to be both the pressure on this sort of relation to formalise and to de-formalise. It might be difficult to trace a dividing line between the two practices.

Conclusion

The events of last December hit the headlines across the world. What struck the bourgeois press were the mass protests which resulted from the banking restrictions that threatened the wholesale impoverishment of the Argentinian middle class. However, as we have seen, there is more to the Argentinian movement than the banging of pots and pans. We have shown how there has been a long tradition of working class struggles based on self-organization, of which the present piqueteros actions are a recent example. Also, at the current moment in Argentinian history, the material conditions of the middle classes have shifted downwards, and this forms the basis for solidarity with proletarian movements based on shared experiences.

As we have seen, the movements in Argentina must be understood in the context of the effects of 'neo-liberal' restructuring in a country on the periphery of capital, where social ties in proletarian areas still form the basis of the organization of life. Whilst in the west, 'neo-liberal' policies led to the decomposition of the organized working class and a slide towards the 'war of all against all', in the periphery a different trend is noticeable. Neo-liberal policies, in attacking working class standards of living and its official form of organization and representation within capital, also halt the incomplete process of subsumption of labour to capital, a process which was intrinsically involved with the state and national development programmes. We have sketched the specific features of Peronist integration which has been one of the central dynamics of struggles in Argentina.

It is important not to be blind to the particularities of Peronism when we enumerate its similarities with European fascism (integration of class through trade union into corporatist system, nationalism etc.). Capitalism on the periphery could not complete the post-war integration into state-led capitalism in the same way as in Europe. Some level of class autonomy, of community co-operation survived where, from their daily experiences in meeting their needs, people recognized that it was as acting as a class for itself that produced results. Here, for example, we see the impact of the semi-autonomous base of Peronism, with its blurred edges (blurred precisely because it shades into un-institutionalised immediate community organization), which eventually became troublesome for Peron and was also an intractable

However, limiting the *Interbarrial* to coordination only could in itself constrain the possibilities of the movement and, in any case, is difficult to keep in practice. To fall back on assembly 'autonomy' and the repudiation of collective decisions to protect the movement from outside incursion could be formalised into the atomisation and isolation of (direct) democracy. Collective discussion and concerted action is needed for particular events and is essential for the long-term prospects of the assemblies – especially in the case of state repression.[59] The 'moment of truth' of Leninist politics is to recognise this need, and that is why they 'lie in ambush' at the *Interbarrial* to influence events.[60] A PO member told the newspaper *Página 12*, "If the assemblies limit themselves to running organic allotments and other neighbourhood questions, that for us is a step backwards."[61] Apart from testifying to the condescending attitude of the Trotskyist groups, this warning has some sense to it. What he cannot see is the relationship between neighbourhood questions and a wider struggle. He doesn't recognise that the 'political' is the activity of the class, organic allotments and all. The revolution can only be the process of struggle of the *autoconvocados*, the 'self convened', (as the *asambleistas* call themselves). It is also too easy to blame the stagnation of the assemblies movement on the leftists – these problems may arise when the movement as a whole doesn't know where to go and has lost the initiative.

The assemblies are also involved in the organisation of *escraches*, a practice inherited from the aftermath of the dictatorship. *Escraches*, meaning an 'outing' or 'exposure' in Argentinian slang, were developed in the years after the dictatorship in order to break the conspiracy of silence shielding the murderers of the dictatorship. They can be explained as a reaction of individuals against the policy of impunity guaranteed by Menem in 1995 to the Generals. They take place at particular locations, often private houses intending to involve the local community to 'out' individuals. They boast an impressive amount of organisation and creativity and attempt to involve locals etc. Their glaring limit is the fact that, with their language of 'justice', they can identify the inequities they've suffered with particular individuals and not the social system as a whole. It is particularly in this that they seem open to be recuperated as merely the radical part of the normalisation process after the dictatorship. On the other hand however, they are also by their very nature a confrontation with the fact that democracy has itself normalised the era of dictatorship, and this could lead to a more far-reaching understanding of the interdependence of periods of democracy and dictatorship in a country like Argentina, especially in the present climate, when the weight of more immediate needs is pressing on its actors.

However, some members of the original *escrache* group, H.I.J.O.S., have expressed reservations about the new informal '*escrache*' practices, which target present members of the bourgeoisie. In this more generalised phenomenon, instances of corruption and other misdeeds of particular individuals are published on the net, in the streets, and even on a TV programme, with addresses and other necessary information. Once outed judges, politicians, businessmen are then insulted, jostled, and sometimes attacked around their homes, to and from work etc. These attacks are also reported to happen spontaneously, on the hoof, when someone is recognised by chance in the street. Even members of the media have been targeted, the much-disliked Canal 13 TV station coming in for a lot of stick in particular. Whilst this could be an expression of a standard middle class rejection of a *comprador* bourgeoisie, the fact that the media is also being attacked is testament to the marginalisation of the middle classes. These actions may also be part of a generalised hatred of the representatives of capital which expresses itself spontaneously.

Another feature of the Argentinian situation associated with the assemblies and the 'middle class' is the barter clubs. As the Wildcat comrade commented, "there are a huge number of people participating, but I don't see it as a 'movement', instead as a method of survival, as a way of getting things that people are now unable to buy. But the rules are the same as in the wider capitalist economy: whoever has money can make a profit and can make others do something for him. For example, there are people

inflation eating into their savings and financial deregulation opened up opportunities for profitable investment for even small or moderate savers. For the part of the working class which was still in secure jobs, wages began to rise faster than prices.

However, a large part of the wave of foreign capital encouraged by Menem's neoliberal policies did not go into productive investments. Foreign capital was more interested in buying up industries if they could quickly make profits by running them more efficiently - i.e. by sacking half the work force and making the other half work harder and more flexibly - rather than in building new factories and equipping them with up to date machinery. As a consequence, the inflow of foreign capital tended to increase, rather than decrease, unemployment at the same time as depressing wages for those at the bottom of the labour market. Between 1991 and 1999 both unemployment and underemployment more than doubled according to official figures.

As a result, the burst in economic prosperity of the early to mid 1990s was far from being evenly spread. Those amongst the Argentinian bourgeoisie and middle classes who were in a position to become local agents for international capital – bankers, lawyers, consultants, accounts, managers and politicians – were able to make a fortune. At the same time those who lost their jobs through downsizing and public spending cuts found themselves swelling the ranks of the poor. Inequality rose sharply between the richest and the poorest. In 1990 the richest ten per cent of the population had an income fifteen times greater than the poorest ten per cent. By 1999 the richest ten per cent had increased their income to twenty three times that of the poorest tenth of the population.

With many of its more militant sections 'downsized', the bulk of the Argentinian working class faced the prospect of steadily rising wages if they kept their heads down or the poverty of unemployment if they did not. As a consequence, militancy declined in the workplace and, as we shall see, the site of struggles shifted to the poor and the unemployed.

Yet this burst of prosperity under Menem was to be short lived. The flood of international capital into Argentina had allowed Menem to adopt more expansionary monetary and fiscal policies. Although a large part of the money pumped into the economy by higher public spending or through tax cuts would end up being spent on imports, thereby increasing the demand for dollars, this would be offset by foreign investors wanting to sell dollars for pesos in order to invest in Argentina. Such expansionary fiscal and monetary policies then gave a further boost to Argentina's economic prosperity which in turn attracted foreign investors anxious not to miss out on the profits to be made from this 'newly emerging market economy'. However, in the mid-1990s the dollar began to rise against the other main world currencies dragging the peso up with it. As a consequence, Argentina's exports lost their competitiveness leading to a strong deterioration in its balance of trade.

The rise in the dollar had caused similar problems for the 'newly emergent market economies' in Asia and in 1997-8 led to financial crises in Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Korea. After the crisis reached Russia in 1999 fears spread that next in line would be Argentina. As a result the financial flows into Argentina went sharply into reverse as foreign investors sought to get their money out of the country before the peso collapsed. The IMF stepped in with a $40bn loan to defend the peso and settle the nerves of international financiers. But in return the IMF insisted on major cuts in public spending, further privatization and more liberalization. As a consequence, Argentina went into recession. The 'virtuous circle' of high levels of foreign investment, expansionary policies leading to economic growth and more foreign investment went into reverse.

The IMF-inspired austerity measures deepened the recession, discouraging foreign investment that then led to the IMF demanding even more austerity measures before it would roll over its loans. Tension increased between the Argentinian government, increasingly unable and unwilling to make further cuts to appease the IMF, and the IMF, increasingly reluctant to bail out recalcitrant governments.

In 1999 the Radical de la Rúa became President, after Menem was involved in a corruption scandal. In his electoral campaign, de la Rúa promised 'order and honesty' in Argentina's political affairs. However, the scandals which were going on discouraged investors and undermined Argentina's economic credibility. By November 2001, with the government unable to impose further cuts without causing public outcry and fearing that the IMF would carry out its threat of not renewing its loans, (leading to the collapse of the peso), the well-off started converting their credits from peso to dollars or other reliable currencies and withdrawing money from the banks. In order to prevent a collapse of the banking system, de la Rúa imposed the *corralito*, restrictions on the money that could be withdrawn from the banks ($1,000/month).[26]

The middle classes, who had supported the policies of successive governments since the 1970s, and who had prospered quietly during the 1990s, were now hit with the full brunt of the crisis, losing not only their savings but often also their jobs. Swathes of the Argentinian middle class were proletarianized almost overnight! Driven in to the street, the middle class now joined the protests of the working class (the *piqueteros*) that had been going on since 1997.

6. The *Piqueteros*.

The new forms of organisation which emerged drew some of their very strength from the drastic nature of this 'neo-liberal' restructuring. Whilst the economic experts were accusing Argentina's political class of implementing the changes too slowly, the bourgeoisie in fact created a new problem for itself by having implementing them *too quickly*. When a large number of closures and redundancies hit almost overnight, the workers laid off en masse *found themselves with common needs in a new situation where their social ties and continuing links of solidarity could be turned into new form of organisation.* The mass worker becomes the mass unemployed worker. The first visible expression of these proletarians against their growing immiseration were sporadic street riots. In 1989 the province of Chubut in Patagonia exploded in a week of struggle, which ended with the resignation of the governor. The same year riots started in Rosario and Buenos Aires, where supermarkets and grocery stores were looted. From then on riots occurred throughout the country. However, the growing number and worsening situation of unemployed workers deprived of their means of survival necessitated more concerted action.

Whilst the tactic had been used from about 1993 onwards, the co-ordinated *piqueteros* movement was born in Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul, two towns of Patagonia created around the State oil company, *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales*. It was privatised by Menem in 1994-5, and as a result 80% of its workers were suddenly laid off. Privatisation means more efficiency: whilst in the past it was *the only major oil company in the world to report losses*, due to the high wages and benefits conceded to its workers, after privatisation its profits rocketed while the living standard of the populations of the oil towns declined. By 1996 the two towns had an unemployment rate of 37.7%. The first riots exploded in June 1996 when the local government failed to reach an agreement with a Canadian corporation to set up a fertiliser plant in the area. The rioters were placated by promises made by the authorities. In March 1997, a teachers' strike against layoffs and wage reductions evolved into the first of the now famous road blockages. When the police attacked the blockade, the towns of Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul mobilised in support. The popular assembly set up to negotiate with the authorities demanded

municipal Peronist leaders have attacked assemblies, such as the assembly of Merlo in Buenos Aires. These attacks are a seal of approval of the radical political significance of the assemblies which its members presumably cannot ignore.

Another issue we should consider is the ever present and contested attempts by leftist groups to bring their politics to bear on the assemblies. Initial press coverage of the Argentinian movement was full of reports of participants rejecting leftist organisations from assemblies and demos. At first glance this may of course look like a radical rejection of politics, but more needs to be said and understood. The obvious thing to say is that if the assemblies were largely 'middle class', then the rejection of leftist politics could be seen as a rejection on the basis of middle class experience of class politics *in general*, in favour of a politics based of citizenry etc. On the other hand, as we have discussed, the 'middle class' cannot really afford this sort of politics any more, and their initial knee-jerk reaction against class politics, could well have quite naturally mutated into a more radical rejection based on their immediate needs and the autonomous forms of struggles they have developed to meet them. If a 'middle class' assembly is trying to organise school meals and stealing electricity and saving neighbours from eviction for non payment of rent, *and discovering new forms of social cooperation in the process*, the intrusion of leftists with their programmes and insistence on leadership would naturally be unwelcome! As one *asambleísta* put it – "the assemblies belong to us, not to militants who look upon us with contempt and try to impose on us an experience that we do not need."[55]

Again we must advise caution in attempts at interpretation because of the opaqueness of this complex situation. We are not easily going to be able to know the class composition and histories of the different assemblies, and so examples of leftist involvement when they come up are going to be difficult to interpret. More generally, we must warn against generalising from isolated examples. Some assemblies will be successfully controlled by this or that leftist party; the general trend, however, has been for the rejection of Trotskyist and other groups, although some attempts to manipulate assemblies, by Trotskyist groups such as the *Partido Obrero* and MAS (Argentinian Socialist Movement), have resulted in the collapse of assemblies.

Overtures by mainstream politicians have so far been rejected. And a transparent attempt by the CTA union confederation to co-opt the assemblies movement earlier this year ended in failure. A proposal had been voted through at the fifth *Interbarrial* to march around the National Congress on the 13th of February – "when the assembly members reached Congress, they saw that a stage had been put up, from which leaders of the CTA were already speaking."[56] They were later vilified for this manoeuvring at the *Interbarrial*. Because of suspicion or outright rejection from the assemblies, the leftist parties have gravitated to the *Interbarrial* in an attempt to bring their influence to bear on proceedings. This has led to a reaction from the assemblies and wearying debates about representation and process. The weekly *Interbarrial* is supposed to be a coordination of autonomous assemblies, not a decision making body in its own right. It soon became clear to the assemblies however, that large numbers of militants and others, (cops and state agents have been mentioned too[57]), came to the *Interbarrial* to vote on issues proposed in the assemblies without being delegated. A debate on representation began, in which concerned *asambleístas* pushed for a one assembly, one vote system with revocable and rotating delegates. There were protests from leftist militants who feared they were being outflanked, knowing they would have little chance of becoming assembly representatives.[58] Many boycotted the debate, and a growing frustration and disillusionment with the *Interbarrial*, because of these problems, was reflected in a sharp fall in attendance, with some assemblies opting to liaise with others on a more informal basis.

Leaving aside the *cacerolazos* and *corralito* protests, what is perhaps more important is that, like the *piqueteros*, the assemblies are being pushed by immediate, everyday needs to develop radical practices which come into confrontation with the essence of capitalist social relations – the commodity form – all the while developing debates on the national debt and petitioning the state on certain issues. Many assemblies have set up communal soup kitchens, organised collective, self-reduction actions to reduce food prices; organised to defend impoverished tenants from evictions and set up groups (sometimes with workers from utility companies) to illegally re-connect people cut off for non-payment of bills to public water and electricity supplies. Assemblies have also negotiated with (or rather pressured) utilities companies for reductions in prices. There is strong support within assemblies for local facilities and schools in crisis – some school canteens, unable to function for lack of funds, are being run by assemblies. This is already an impressive list of steps of direct appropriation of use values by people for whom 'paying for things' – exchange value – *must become a ridiculous notion*, if they are to meet their human needs.

The other important mobilisation has been around the problems of health provision - hospitals and clinics being in absolute crisis due to the collapse of PAMI, the state medical service. In response to price inflation and shortages of drugs, (many drugs were withdrawn from the shelves at the start of the crisis in order to protect their prices), one group, including medical workers, set up a table in the centre of Buenos Aires where people could bring their unwanted drugs and perhaps find something they or a family member needed; a long and desperate queue quickly formed. At the same time the health committees of some 36 assemblies had made a written request to the government of Buenos Aires proposing that the committees participate or take over the running of faltering hospitals. The health department exhausted their patience with diversionary tactics, meagre concessions to the plan etc. A turning point was reached – "In the face of their failure to address our concerns in writing, we resolve to suspend meetings with these bureaucrats. And we propose to take control ourselves, forming Popular Health Committees in each hospital, following the example of the Belgrano-Núñez assembly, which got medicines and supplies for their hospitals through their mobilisation."[52] The assembly of Belgrano-Núñez, a prosperous barrio of Buenos Aires, had joined with other local assemblies in April 2002 to assist the stricken local hospital, whose workers had informed them that drugs were being withheld by pharmaceutical companies, leading to price increases of 300% and 400%. The hospital workers and *asambleístas* produced a list of the drugs most sorely needed, and went en masse to the laboratories of Novartis, a pharmaceutical company, to demand the drugs. Within days, Novartis was forced to provide 25,000 doses of 1,129 different medicines.[53] In September 2002, the assembly of Flores in Buenos Aires occupied a clinic that had been disused for 6 years with the aim of opening it to workers from occupied factories who have been cut out of union managed health provision, and also for the use of the neighbours. The assemblies have moved also in the winter to occupy disused buildings to use for meetings and organising. The assembly of Parque Lezama Sur, occupying a disused bank building to which they invite *piqueteros* and other groups, describe this initiative encouragingly as "not about simply replacing the state in the functions in which it has absented itself [health, education], neither is it about simple humanitarianism, nor nostalgic actions destined to uphold the old national-state promises of integration and progress. Instead it is about taking responsibility/control of our actual conditions...proposing the establishment of social links where capitalism acts as a force of separation, of sadness and the formation of isolated individuals."[54]

As we have seen, there is a growing tendency within assemblies such as these to fill the gaps where the state has become unable or unwilling to act. As is clear from the health issue, the assemblies move, according to the urgency of their need, from discussing the national debt and making demands of the state to taking direct action. Assemblies have also been attacked by plain-clothes police and other armed gangs. Members have been followed, threatened and beaten. Goons gathered together by

jobs, tax moratoria and investments in the oil company. They decided to demobilise when some promises were made, including the creation of 500, (badly paid) jobs. The moderation of the assembly was due to the fact that people could see no good, in the situation, in an escalation of the protest. By the same token, the intervention in the assembly by local politicians was accepted.

The *piqueteros*' tactic of blocking roads was soon being taken up in other towns. It was used in Jujuy and Salta the following year, provinces in the north of the country. In Jujuy on May 7th 1997, *piqueteros* blockaded the Horacio Guzmán Bridge, Argentina's main link to Bolivia. Over the following four days, protests and blockades spread through the province, amongst both employed and unemployed. The movement was attacked by troops, (tear gas and rubber bullets were used), but provincial officials eventually capitulated and promised to create 12,500 jobs and increase welfare.[27] The spread of *piquetero* tactics and their forms of organisation moved first through the provinces, but then came closer to the capital when they reached La Matanza, in Greater Buenos Aires. This sprawling industrial suburb, with a population of two million, had been badly affected by unemployment. Here *piquetero* numbers grew substantially to 4,000-6,000 people. This new area of *piquetero* activity was also important because *piquetero* actions could now strangle the capital by blocking its major arteries, all within easy reach. We should also mention at this point events in Tartagal and Mosconi, both towns were occupied and held for a few days from the police in winter 1999/spring 2000, by forces including *piqueteros*. After the death of a demonstrator in November 2000, Tartagal was again rocked by riots – government buildings were set alight and cops taken hostage!

Typically, a *piquetero* highway blockage would have demands such as the withdrawal of police, the repudiation of state repression, the release of jailed comrades, unemployment benefits, food, health facilities, and demands for both 'genuine' jobs and *Planes Trabajar* or Work Plans – the later being effectively small unemployment subsidies (120-150 pesos a month per family, only available to those with families, and paid in 'Lecops', a national parallel currency or 'bond').[28] The state would give out these work plans to defuse situations. Over the years, *piquetero* actions for Work Plans have often met with success. The subsidies are given to heads of families – say, 100 out of 800 *piqueteros* – rather than forming the basis of a universally-shared benefit, miniscule though it would be. Work Plans are normally intended to be taken in exchange for light public works, like municipal gardening or the upkeep of roads. They amount to a pittance, representing in their value about an eighth of the material needs of a family of four. *Echanges et Movements*[29] however, also mention 'organised looting' by *piqueteros* in 1999, and an escalation of violent, direct appropriation of goods in 2000-1, especially around the December events of 2001. Goods vehicles trapped in pickets were looted, warehouses and supermarkets attacked in a concerted way, and anger expressed in attacks on government buildings. Already in June 2000, a violent riot in General Mosconi which left 2 dead, led to a country-wide response with 300 road-blocks. We must not forget these more violent and direct expressions of piquetero organisation, some of which may be more hidden.[30]

Small groups of *piqueteros*, organising locally in their neighbourhoods in the first instance (eg MTD Lanús – MTD stands for Movement of Unemployed Workers), are often affiliated to a larger 'Coordinator' group, which is in turn affiliated to one of the four major *piquetero* confederations. These are the CCC (Class Combative Current) group and the FTV (Federation for Land and Housing),[31] the *Bloque Piquetero*, and the *Coordinadora Anibal Verón*, which once formed part of the *Bloque Piquetero* but which has increasingly distanced itself from it, insisting on its total independence from parties and unions.

The FTV has a large membership and wide support in La Matanza, in the west of Buenos Aires province. It also includes groups under the banner 'Barrios de Pie' – neighbourhoods on their feet. The

CCC is the (relatively autonomous) organised *piquetero* union arm of the (Maoist) Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR),[32] It too has a strong base in La Matanza, and also in the northern provinces of Argentina. The *Bloque Piquetero* gathers together dozens of *piquetero* groups including the Polo Obrero, (linked to leftist parties such as the Trotskyist *Partido Obrero* – Workers' Party), and a handful of other leftist groups.[33]

The CCC and FTV-CTA group are considered the most reformist elements of the *piquetero* movement, with a tendency to negotiate with the government. Divisions within the movement over this led to the suspension of the third National Assembly of *piqueteros* planned for December 2001. A report from the *Coordinadora Anibal Verón* describes *Anibal Verón's* eight-hour picket of seven bridges and access routes to Buenos Aires city on the 21st November 2001, contrasting it with another action, by the FTV grouping, which had started a few days before. The FTV *piquete* had in fact allowed transport to circulate on one side of the street from 5am to 10am and again from 5pm to 9pm, so as not to cause too much disruption in La Matanza. But, as they say, "While in La Matanza the third day of roadblocks 'with alternative routes... passed without a response...the firmness and organization of each of our bridge-blocks meant that, in spite of public declarations by the Ministry of Work that they would not receive the unemployed because we were 'blocking roads', *in a few hours the same Ministry was sat in front of us at a negotiating table*, publicly ratifying the commitment we sought."[34] The statement goes on to criticise the FTV picket: "That which is generated by a road-block – born as a tool of the unemployed with which they can interrupt the movement of goods via national highways, to generate economic problems which, from a position of intransigence, forces the government to make concessions to the demonstrators – in the hands of these sectors ends up being a blocking ... of the pavement, by the side of the road, while transport freely circulates!"

Importantly, *Anibal Verón*, (and perhaps other *piquetero* groups), eschew mediation, literally refusing to meet the state on its own terrain, forcing government negotiators to come to the pickets. This helps to ensure that negotiations over limited aims take place on the *piqueteros'* terrain *politically*. 'Work Plans' and the rest are given out to families, rather than individuals, everyone can take part in the negotiations, the work plans are given out in a transparent manner, and everyone can decide on when to clear the road etc.[35] Limited aims, which from the outside look to be merely within the reformist dynamic of capital, are achieved with an understanding of the needs of proletarian struggles (such as refusal of mediation), which point to the importance of the process of struggle – social recomposition against the atomisation of capitalist social relations – as the real subversive current.

Groups like *Anibal Verón* criticise the CTA and CCC *piquetero* groupings for sending delegations to put their case to both government and employers (for example in January 2002 CCC-organised *piqueteros* sent delegates to the oil company YPF-Repsol to demand 40,000 "genuine jobs", and that working hours should be shared between those working and those who had been sacked; and another delegation was received by the Casa Rosada to demand Work Plans and food and the release of political prisoners). More generally, we can also see the incursions of the official unions into the *piqueteros* movement as just an attempt at recuperation, or as an opportunity for cross-sector solidarity, maybe partly initiated by the base, which could eventually break free from its present limits. The bureaucracy may well have a need to increase its membership and leverage on the class by recruiting *piqueteros* under the banner of coordination and organisation, but *piqueteros have their own reasons* to understand the need for this coordination, one which, in a generalised proletarian offensive, could contradict the mediation of unions.

In February 2002 Duhalde, perhaps trying to regain some of the ground lost to mediating channels, declared that there would be a universal dole of 150 Lecops per family (*piqueteros* have demanded

state of emergency, (and the memories of dictatorship that it awoke), *and in that could recognise each other as subjects in struggle, ultimately on the basis of a real, material rapprochement in their experience of exploitation.* After that day, in the many *cacerolazos* that followed, placards saying anything about the lost savings were in a tiny minority. By the same token then, it would be wrong to characterise the assemblies as populated solely by disgruntled savers, who, presumably, would turn their back on the movement once their savings were returned to them. The problem of bank freezes takes up a relatively small part of the discussions of the assemblies and the *Interbarrial*. Though their appearance was sudden, the assemblies did not materialise out of a vacuum, but out of a developing situation of material impoverishment and the attendant disillusionment with politics, (in the general elections of October 2001, 22% of the (compulsory) ballot was blank or spoiled, whilst 26% of voters stayed at home). At the beginning it seems, the new assemblies, based on their middle class constituency, (apart from passing numerous resolutions on political subjects such as the national debt), were concentrating on organising new *cacerolazos*, the 'symbolic' form of protest associated with the middle classes. The *cacerolazos* had a life of their own anyway, attracting many more people than regularly attended the assemblies. They took place every Friday in the weeks after the 19th, in almost ritual fashion.

Violence was a feature of savers' actions from the 19th onwards. Since then, savers' protests inside banks have also been attacked by the police. This does not, of course, suffice as proof of the revolutionary intent of the middle classes. We must note some of the statements that accompany middle class corralito protests – "we are the middle class, we send our children to school, we pay our taxes, and now we have been robbed.", "we never break the law, we are not criminals", "without savers no credit, without credit no production – without production, no nation." These slogans display classic middle class subjectivity of course – the implicitly anti-working class, self-righteous sense of betrayal of those that ordinarily play by the rules and do well by them, which is also a general identification with a *properly functioning* system of capitalist wealth production. But we are almost tempted to say 'so what?' The subjectivity of the newly proletarianised middle classes is going to lag behind their practice in a situation of impoverishment. It is not what this or that skint 'middle class' individual thinks about his situation at a particular moment which is important, but what they will be *forced to do* as a *proletarianised* class. Not all of them will be completely skint – and the slogans quoted above may sometimes come from the less badly off parts of the middle class – but it looks like their lot can only worsen and a large proportion of these people are having to come to terms with a situation where their traditional demands for a renewal of the political system, based on moans about corruption and the failure of mediators, is failing to meet their immediate needs.

Neither should we assume that the savers involved in actions against the *corralito* are only 'middle class', as it has also affected workers with relatively small saving, pensioners, and indirectly but very tangibly, as we have already noted, workers dependent on the black economy. Indeed, *Echanges* claim that the unofficial sector makes up 50% of the real economy![50] On the 15th May 2002, an elderly couple in their eighties who had got a court order to force their bank, Banco de la Nación, to release their life savings, found that the bank still refused, claiming that the law had changed since the order was signed. The couple, living on a pension of 150 pesos a month (£30), decided to remain in the bank until they got their money (US $38,000), and sat themselves in the window, refusing to leave. As night fell, two local assemblies arrived to support them, joining the crowd that had already gathered, until there were around three hundred people, banging pots and chanting "Give them their money back!" Having entered the bank that morning, the exhausted couple finally left at 9pm, with the bank's promise of half their money the next day.[51] This example, we feel, ably demonstrates the possibilities of different needs, in a situation of class mobilisation, to be immediately recognised by others and their meaning transformed in this socialisation process.

difficult to see how it will have the means to buy off the middle class. Even a patched up settlement involving new IMF money can only be a short-term solution for the bourgeoisie.

One of the biggest difficulties for us has been to try to understand the composition of this newly vocal and troublesome middle class. What does 'middle class' mean in Argentina? Some comment that, for an Argentinian, 'middle class' can mean what we in the West would recognise as a secure proletarian job, even a factory job. This entails a problem of class categories being mixed up in translation, but the issue does not end there. It seems clear that a large number of people that we would recognise as middle class have plummeted into a life of bare survival. The papers are full of stories of academics and other professionals being reduced to selling candles in public parks, or well dressed Buenos Aires families exchanging their extensive wardrobes in the barter clubs, or even forced to collect rubbish on the streets. *Echanges* state that some 500 000 people have fallen into social immiseration to populate the *villas miserias* where banners ironically proclaim: 'Welcome to the middle classes!' One Argentinian economist states that "the middle classes understand that they've reached the end of the road. It's now a whole new situation."[48] But what of the teachers and other government workers which have been such a strong feature of this cycle of struggle from its beginnings in the mid-90s? Would their traditional status and pay mark them out as middle class professionals? What about the petit-bourgeoisie? Are many of them losing their property in this economic climate? Are they involved in popular assemblies and in attacks against the *corralito*? What is the relation of the assemblies to the barter clubs and who is involved in these? All of these questions go to explaining the difficulty of understanding the phenomenon of the popular assemblies.

It is often stated that the neighbourhood assemblies – one of the forms associated with middle class organisation in Argentina - are so heterogeneous that it is almost impossible to study them. The fact that there seem to be neighbourhood assemblies in all areas of Buenos Aires involving proletarians in different situations as well can lead to lazy affirmations of diversity and openness for post modernist ideologues intent on shedding class as a social category. *Echanges et Movement*, dispel some of the fog by distinguishing between two broad tendencies of neighbourhood assemblies.[49] One as a phenomenon coming from a long tradition of neighbourhood organisation in working class areas and shanty towns, merging with the assemblies of the *piqueteros* in the new situation of mass unemployment of the 90s; and the other as a result of the sudden and more recent impoverishment of the middle classes. In recent months of course, with different sectors recognising each other's needs in struggles, these two tendencies may have increasingly coordinated their actions and demands, (and certainly have talked to each other at the *Interbarrial*), further complicating the situation. But if the 'middle class' assemblies are dismissed, it is usually by identifying them with the merely middle class problem of the *corralito*, (in Argentina certainly, they are not understood in this limited way any longer). This identification is then useful to denounce the so-called middle class struggle and their supposed hegemony in the movement. Although it is true that these assemblies were formed around the time of the implementation of the bank freezes and that this problem mobilises a part of their energies, it is a mistake to limit them to this.

Twenty assemblies sprang up in Buenos Aires in the two weeks following the 19th and 20th, and there are now estimated to be 140 across the country, with some 8,000 regular participants. It's sometimes said or assumed that the first *cacerolazo*, on the19th of December, was a protest about the *corralito*. Certainly there was widespread anger and despair over what many suspected was the permanent disappearance of their life savings. But it *was* De La Rúa's announcement of the state of emergency which mobilised people in an immediate, spontaneous reaction. Whilst of course the 'middle class' experience of the *corralito* was one of the reasons for their presence on the streets on the 19th, the radical meaning of the events that ensued is that everyone was on the streets refusing with disgust the

380 – both at pickets and in the assemblies). The contemptuous response to this measly benefit was clear in the two huge *piquetero* mobilisations of May 2002 when hundreds of roads were blocked. The governments' inability to implement a meaningful, universal level of unemployment benefit and its insistence on Work Plans has caused it endless problems. During De La Rúa's presidency, the Ministry of Social Development removed the administration of Work Plans from the local authorities in favour of their distribution by NGOs, partly to curb municipal clientelism in the province of Buenos Aires, and to limit the growth of small *piquetero* groups in the city. The policy backfired when unemployed organisations created their own NGOs to administer the plans and to set up their own social projects using the funds from them. This was a factor in the growth of the large and increasingly powerful coordinations of groups of unemployed activists in the poorest neighbourhoods, which form one aspect of the assemblies movement that we will discuss later.[36]

Today, many of the grassroots MTDs (Unemployed Workers Movements) such as the MTD Solano, part of the *Coordinadora Anibal Verón*, are making use of the work plans to set up projects in their own barrios, such as bakeries, metal and wood workshops, schools and vegetable plots, as well as running workshops to discuss political questions. The projects are staffed by *piqueteros* in receipt of work plans (direct to their bank accounts) who put the four hours a day they are supposed to do in exchange for the money to the service of their immediate communities. The northern town of General Mosconi is perhaps the most advanced in the use of work plans, with piquetero groups setting up around 300 projects.

Here we can see that the organisation of the *piqueteros* is not demobilised by government concessions; the state does not have strong enough mediating structures to individualise people and recuperate them in a settlement. Whilst the moneys are given to heads of families or other individuals and go to their bank accounts, they effectively end up becoming funds for further collective, autonomous organisation. With the withering of mediating structures, the *piqueteros*, forced to meet their everyday needs autonomously, experience an almost constant state of mobilisation – with the heightened level of communication between social subjects that this entails - in which the existence of the 'political' as a separate sphere is increasingly challenged. Ironically, the very practical nature of official *piquetero* demands, (jobs, food parcels), are an expression of this, and are in fact the other side of the coin to the much publicised 'rejection of politics', which seems to contradict them. Even though it forms part of the attack against the living standards of the working class - is capital shooting itself in the foot by reducing the mediating structures of its state?

One problem with 'work plans' on the other hand is that they sometimes help to further undermine the salaries and security of waged workers. One kind of Work Plan for women called *Madres Cuidadores* (caring mothers) is little more than a way to replace teachers on the cheap, and has been denounced as such by teachers' unions. We must also recall at this point that a neo-Peronist liberaliser like Menem was able to fall back on the semi-autonomous, tentacular Peronist neighbourhood organisations when he was attacking state provision, channelling funds through this network to cushion the effect. De La Rúa, as we have just seen, had similar policies. Other bourgeoisies across the region have also opened the doors to NGOs, charities and aided the informal, grassroots sector as part of the same process of economic liberalisation. In this maybe the executives of capital lean too much on forms of organisation which they will find difficult to control in the long run.

However, we must not fall into the trap of simply cheerleading this process as the rediscovery of grass roots autonomy and empowerment – the type of facile endorsements we criticise elsewhere in this issue. The problem is maybe precisely there – 'autonomy'. There is a tendency for this class experience to become merely the management of survival within capitalism, tied loosely into the system through

aid, charity and clientelism, but understanding itself to be autonomous from capitalist social relations. Identifying capital narrowly with international capitalism, (multinationals, financial institutions, the US and EU bourgeoisie) and the *comprador*[37] bourgeoisie which manage their operations within the country, 'grassroots' experience may be 'naturalised', seen as a given 'thing'. Capitalism is not seen as a social relation which includes all social interaction including those within the barrio, but a rapacious, exploitative class outside the barrio. To put it another way, the relationship of exploitation within self-exploitation is externalised. If the class can externalise this relationship it will always end up preserving capitalism, in preserving its life and rebelling against the 'capitalist class'.

Another important feature of the *piquetero* movement is the fact that it has become a node of struggle for different sectors of the class. People in work, especially those whose jobs are threatened, have participated extensively in *piquetero* actions, (as we noted, the first *pickets* were initiated by teachers). This is a critical point to keep in mind if we want to evaluate the long-term possibilities of the Argentinean movement. Although the work plans meted out to the unemployed may sometimes lower the wages of other workers, more importantly maybe different sectors of the class are recognising their needs in each other's struggles. The bourgeoisie is finding it very difficult to decompose the class into antagonistic sectors fighting over jobs. The reserve army of labour is not performing its designated duty! As an example of this solidarity, on the 4th of April 2002 a *Bloque Piquetero* march, in the coastal town of La Plata, passed by the provincial government building before heading for the Family Office, to offer its support to state workers on strike there. Protesting at cuts in overtime, wages and other benefits, the workers had taken over various buildings and were in permanent assembly. When the *piqueteros* arrived, the gendarmería were inside and the assembly had been suspended. But when the workers saw the size of the crowd which had come to support them, they shouted at the gendarmería to leave and continued with their assembly.[38] *Piqueteros* have also defended the occupied factories from eviction, pushing back police attacks on numerous occasions, as have members of local assemblies and other neighbours.

Although in the early years of the movement the state and the bourgeois press could manipulate broad middle class opinion against what was painted as a dangerous, lumpen-proletarian threat, the increased immiseration of the middle classes has narrowed the gap between the two sectors. The new possibility of this situation was evident in the practical solidarity of the events of December 2001on the streets. It emerged in the days following the national *cacerolazo* of the 25th of January, that the police had blocked Pueyrredón Bridge, the gateway to Buenos Aires, to stop hundreds of *piqueteros* crossing to join the *cacerolazo* in the Plaza de Mayo. Furthermore, on the 28th of January 2002, a march of *piqueteros* from La Matanza to the Plaza de Mayo was greeted and given food by the neighbourhood assemblies who accompanied them the rest of the way. The slogan 'Piquete y *cacerola*, la lucha es una sola' (Picket and 'pot-banger', the struggle is the same') was heard that day and soon became popular. In February 2002, after the announcement of the abandonment of the dollar-peso parity, a *piquetero* march coming into Buenos Aires from the poor suburbs, was again greeted by the 'middle classes' of the centre of Buenos Aires with food and drinks. It was of course understood that the inflation that would result from the devaluation, (together with the effect on savings), would affect everyone. Whether these expressions of solidarity can be further concretised remains to be seen.

In order to discredit the *piqueteros* in public opinion and possibly to prepare the terrain for repression, the State has attempted to smear the movement. In March, in a calculatingly menacing tone, Duhalde stated that: "in the piqueteros movement we believe that there is a part of authentic protest which is becoming smaller...and another part financed by extremist groups. We have been told that the finances [for the *piqueteros* in Salta, north of Argentina] may come from the FARC of Colombia, or in other words, from narco-trafficking."[39] It is important to note that a US military base is planned for the area

There are said to be 100 companies involving some 10 000 workers under some form of worker's control in Argentina. Brukman and Zanon, along with the Clinica Junin of Córdoba, form the small, politicised wing, presenting themselves as an independent movement concerned with much more than just putting their factories back into production. Brukman, for example, continues to be a focal point for struggles, being a site for assemblies, workshops, exhibitions and organising. It is difficult to get a clear picture from the scant information we have available, but in general the others seem to have a different political orientation, calling themselves 'co-operatives', and constitute themselves in official structures involving state and unions. The two structures regrouping these companies are the MNER (National Movement of Recuperated Companies) comprising 3600 workers, and FENCOOTER(National Federation of Co-Operatives and Re-Converted Companies) with 1447 workers. In 'co-operatives' such as Ghelco SA., a producer of ingredients for frozen desserts, or the publishers Chilavert, the workers set up co-ops to restart production after the companies began bankruptcy proceedings. On the 12th September, the Buenos Aires legislature voted unanimously to permit the 'recuperation' by law of these two factories - the deal is that the government of Buenos Aires will pay the rent of the building for two years, while the equipment is ceded to the workers. After two years, the co-ops will apparently have first refusal on buying the plant. Brukman workers differentiate themselves from this settlement, and show an awareness of the pitfalls of self-management. As on of them stated: "we don't want to set up a cooperative... where we would have to submit ourselves to 11 people who would boss everyone else around."[44]

A comrade from the German group *Wildcat* recently visited one of these co-operatives: "I visited an occupied metallurgical factory, La Baskonia, in La Matanza. There we met an advisor from the CGT. We soon realised that they'd opted for the legal route, for founding a cooperative before setting the factory to work. They are not interested in joining together with the other factories in struggle, nor in workers' control, nor even in nationalisation. 'It's a Peronist occupation', commented my comrades. Another example is IMPA, an aluminium factory which has been functioning in the form of a co-op for some time. The good thing is that they lend out one of the factory floors for solidarity parties – a fantastic place for parties! – but I never saw the workers from IMPA at any demonstrations or assemblies."[45] The last we have heard of the occupied factories at the time of writing is that Zanon and Brukman called a meeting on the 7th of September which attracted around 500 people, including leftist parties, where it was agreed to set up a national strike fund. On the same day at La Baskonia, the MNER also called a meeting attracting the same sort of numbers, but amongst the workers attending were members of Congress, senators and the vice-president of the cabinet.

8. The 'middle classes' and the neighbourhood assemblies

The French group *Mouvement Communiste* warn of the dangers of the alliance between the proletariat and the middle classes in Argentina: "History shows the exploited have little to expect from these sectors of society, always ready, in the last instance, to save their own skins by allying themselves with the dominant class to the detriment of the working class."[46] Time will tell if this turns out, again, to be the case. But this view ignores the rapid and drastic proletarianisation of the majority of the middle classes.[47]

Of course, the warnings of *Mouvement Communiste* have a basis in reality, which proletarians involved in struggle recognise. Working class cynicism about the new 'middle class' movements in Argentina – "they're only on the streets now because their pockets have been touched" – neatly testify to this truth while simultaneously confirming the reality of the middle class' changed situation. Some proletarians are reluctant to tie their fate too closely to that of the middle class assemblies movement for fear that they will eventually be betrayed. Considering the state's near bankruptcy however, it is

production to providing for the needs of the 'community' - especially for hospitals, schools and the unemployed.

In La Matanza, the closed Panificadora Cinco bakery was occupied by its workers with the support of the whole neighbourhood and put back to work to provide bread at reduced prices for the locals. There also, the *piqueteros* defended the occupation against a police intervention.

The workers' own statements and some of the information above point to the limits of self-management. Their belief that they can run the firm better than the bosses may originally come from their antagonistic relationship to the capitalist imposition of work on the shop floor. Running it better may mean making it easier for the workers to work there, contradicting the valorisation needs of the bosses. The fixing of the boiler may be one such example – workers may experience this both as an everyday nuisance as well as recognising its need in the smooth running of the factory, whilst the bosses for their part want to cut costs. The boss is then both a problem because he doesn't recognise the workers needs, but at the same time, he is seen as a sort of philistine of production, who ignores the qualitative aspects of production. As the workers occupy their work place and put it into motion under their own control however, this once antagonist relationship based on their immediate and intimate experience of the production process becomes a necessary identification with the business in itself – paying bills etc.

At this point the understanding of exploitation fixes narrowly on the incompetence of their particular bosses, as the workers, now in charge, need to prove to themselves and others that there's a better way of doing things. In other words, it is forgotten that the bosses are themselves constrained by capitalism to fuck their workers over. And when the workers forget this, they gloss over their own link, as 'self-managers', to this constraining social relation. Isolated in this situation where an inward looking, voluntaristic mindset is required, the burden of exploitation may end up being doubly hard, and splits may emerge, with the most committed and militant driving the others and effectively becoming the new capitalist bosses as they try to make the (once collective) project work. Or the hard won collective control of the production process may not be relinquished resulting in the workers not having the necessary capitalist discipline required to make their enterprise survive in the unforgiving capitalist market. One way or another, the law of value will re-impose itself on the activity of the workers.

We must be careful not to simply dismiss these occupations however. These struggles are a process which form part of an extensive class mobilisation. Some of their radical tendencies, such as the proposal to produce for local need, (Brukman proposed to cover the textile requirements of public hospitals, Panificadora Cinco provision of bread) - even if they do not prove possible or ultimately stay within the frame of exchange relations – move to concretise the demand that immediate needs be met, facing up to the mediation of exchange value. This is the social possibility of struggles, which can challenge the fetishism of commodities. This process of collectivisation of proletarian needs is produced through a heightened level of communication on the ground in Argentina. These workers are experiencing every day the solidarity of other proletarians in different sectors, *and so materially feel the need and possibility to reciprocate*. Their reformist demands such as nationalisation could, in a more generalised class offensive, be subverted by these very social links. The everyday experience of decision making and power on the shop floor is another important aspect of their experience. Whether the Argentinian movement can or will extend enough to give them the opportunity to realise the radical moments of their struggles is a different matter. For its part, as we have seen, the state seems to be aware of the radical potential of the occupations, using force to try and retake the factories on a number of occasions.

of Salta that Duhalde is referring to; the same place where, last year, US marines carried out joint exercises with Argentinean troops. This rhetoric also serves to separate the 'good' *piqueteros* from the 'bad'. The looting panic whipped up by the media following the December events (when rumours, intended to keep people off the city centre streets, flew around the poor Buenos Aires suburbs that 'looters' were attacking people's home and were on their way; fires were lit on many residential street corners and people prepared to defend their blocks against attacks which never came) was another attempt by the state to split the *piqueteros* from the 'middle classes'. As we have seen from the links formed in January, the attempt failed.

On the 30th May, the *piqueteros* blocked 1,000 highways, bridges and roads throughout Argentina, as well as railway lines. Their mass mobilisation was accompanied on the same day by strike action by airport workers that brought Ezeiza, Buenos Aires' airport, to a standstill. President Duhalde indicated his impatience with *piquetero* tactics, saying that road-blockings could be tolerated no longer. In light of this, it is clear that the police attack on the *piquetero* action of the 26th of June, in Avellaneda, that left two young *piqueteros*, Dario Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki, dead and some 40 injured, were not simply the work of 'maverick cops'. Importantly, thousands immediately descended on the Plaza De Mayo in response to the murders, growing to some 50 000 people two days later. The alert response to state repression reduces the options for the bourgeoisie.

7. The factories

Whilst the most striking and original feature of the Argentinian movement is the *piqueteros*, our interest in this highly organised and radical movement, based on disrupting the sphere of circulation of capital, should not blind us to the question of what the class as a whole in Argentina is doing. The aspects of radical practice in the movement which go so far as heralding new social relations should not make us forget to look at the totality. The question that has come up in recent months for observers of the events is – what are the workers in the sphere of production doing? It is a fact that the radical organisations in the factories which we have discussed above in the context of the struggles of the 1970s, were severely repressed during the years of the military regime. Almost all the authors we have come across who spoke of the situation in Argentina today complain of a lack of militancy in the workplace. The complaint is that the unions are completely tied into the system, and so are cowardly and given to manipulating workers in tokenistic strikes, demos or days of action in order to both safely channel worker discontent and to increase their bureaucratic power. The reasons given for this situation in the work place range from the somewhat vague contention that the workers are simply sold into the official union structures (this, understandably, from a member of the independent *motoqueros* base union), to the belief that the workers in work are just too scared to lose their jobs; whilst *Mouvement Communist* sketch an effective class compromise recently patched up between Duhalde and workers in key sectors. They think that with the possible rejection of electoral politics "the support of the CGT, the only mass organisation capable of ensuring social peace...is essential. Its inclusion into the government...is a possible hypothesis given the independent progress of the class struggle. This is why Duhalde is trying to make the middle classes, the petit-bourgeoisie and the workers of the state sector [organised by the CTA] pay for the State's fiscal crisis. He traces out a new 'alliance of the producers' composed of the bosses of heavy industry, the workers in these industries organised by the CGT and some unemployed workers bought off by some precarious jobs within the state administration. To fly the flag of this new Peronist settlement [Duhalde] didn't hesitate to promise the general secretary of the CGT, Rudolpho Daer, to withdraw the restrictions on bank accounts as far as they concerned salaries."[40] We cannot at this point comment much more on this, although it is an important point to keep in mind. Some of the moneys saved in the huge cuts of the past two decades could well be used to try and buy off the diminished number of workers in key strategic industries like oil production. It

also gels with the political events in Argentina since December 2001 – the rejection of the Radical De La Rua, opening the way for the Peronist Duhalde to try and limit the damage of the uprising by re-opening the clientelist Peronist channels still connected to the workers, through the medium of the CGT.

We have mentioned the frequency of general strikes in recent years. Although union led and of course limited by the unions' own agenda, we must not assume that the workers simply march in step behind their mediators. We note that railway workers have been on strike more than once over the last year, and in September 2002 the transport workers of Metrovia mobilised to demand a reduction of their working day to six hours, a concession they held until only a few years ago. There are also numerous, 'hidden' strikes in small factories over closures, non-payment of wages etc.

We must not forget the instances of common *piquetero* struggles by (mostly) state workers and the unemployed in the provinces from the mid-90s onwards. Workers in state industries threatened with privatisation have also used road blocking tactics on numerous occasions, for example at Cutral-Co and Plaza Huincul, when the petrol company YPF was sold to Repsol. 36.8% of all road pickets between December 1993 and December 1999 were made by waged workers! The struggles of the state workers have been a major feature of the Argentinian movement and are still very much a live issue. It is a question intimately involved with state clientelism. As we have already noted, with the expansion of the state, the clientelist structure Peron tried to incorporate into his Justicialist settlement was partly achieved with the explosion of 'phoney' jobs in the central state and local administration. More recently, Menem, no doubt to placate the IMF which was making business with the central state and so complaining about its spending, sacked 110 000 federal state workers (as well as 107 000 provincial state workers). He also transferred 200 000 teachers from the federal budget to local government budgets. In Buenos Aires province for example (where Duhalde was governor), the number of state workers rises substantially from 280 000 in 1991 to 400 000 in 1999, no doubt soaking up the 110 000 workers sacked from the central state in Buenos Aires. The need for the Peronist governors (and at one remove, the Peronist president) to keep their huge electoral clientele is the reason for these machinations. This reluctance to attack state jobs decisively show how deep the Peronist class settlement was rooted, even in the ultra-liberal Menem years. As we have seen however, the attack did start in the late 90s, but is still contentious – recent negotiations with the IMF have revolved around the issue of the provincial budgets, the IMF asking for 60% cuts. One would think that more massive redundancies might ensue, but the game is not so simple for the bourgeoisie, with an insurrectionary movement in near permanent mobilisation. Duhalde's administration is squeezed between the IMF and the movements – during a bout of negotiation with the IMF, one government negotiator complained that the IMF didn't understand that the administration is constrained by the fact that there are at least 30 actions a day in Argentina!

Most workers may now be keeping their heads down at work but what has emerged is that many of them are involved through the neighbourhood assemblies. They take part simply as neighbours and also report on the workplace organising that does go on. For example, at one neighbourhood assembly meeting,[41] a worker from the nearby Buquebus ferry service across the River Plate to Uruguay, described the actions that were being taken against redundancies and asked for support, to the assembly's great approval, as did another who worked at the Clarín newspaper. Many other workers take part in the *cacerolazos* as well, a form of protest usually associated with the 'middle class'. It is vital to keep these things in mind. Workers not actively in struggle at work may be in touch with the needs and actions of other sectors in struggle through neighbourhood organisations. Furthermore they take part in decision making, in demos and other organisations, *as neighbours in concert with other neighbours*, through these organisations. The positive thing in this is that a directly social dimension of struggle is available to many workers, one which looks beyond their specific, sectoral interests in particular

industries. But the limitation may be that workers separate their everyday needs (which they see as belonging to their experience as neighbours), from their role as producers of surplus value at work. The later would have to be socialised too, and this understanding turned practically against capitalist social relations, to really paralyse the system.

The other form of worker organisation to discuss is the much publicised factory occupations. We must not forget that these occupations, and the startling expressions of solidarity that they have engendered, are few, but at the same time they do come out of a material situation now nearly universal for the Argentinian proletariat, hence their radical potential *and* their maybe inflated fame.

The most widely reported factory occupations are those of Zanon ceramics factory in the province of Neuquén, and Buenos Aires' Brukman textiles. The Zanon occupation started when the 400 workers were threatened with losing their jobs as the bosses of the factory stopped paying them and effectively started winding down the business. The workers responded by occupying the factory, setting it in motion using the materials still inside. Within two days they had produced enough ceramics to pay all their wages for a month. They sell their products at 60% of their previous price through a network of young supporters who take them from door to door. Organised through their trade union, SOECN, though with no support from the national ceramic-workers' union FOCRA (part of the CGT), the workers have refused the owners' attempts to negotiate the fate of the factory. They have totally rejected the ridiculous terms of a possible return of the bosses – wage-cuts, laying off 360 of the 400 workers. Instead they demand "the immediate opening of the plant under workers' control, with no redundancies and no wage cuts, and with full payment of all outstanding salaries. If the bosses refuse to do this we will demand the nationalisation of the factory under workers' control, as part of a scheme to provide public works to build houses, schools and hospitals, all which are much needed in our province. In this way, we can help provide an answer to the problem of unemployment by creating real jobs."[42] They propose to share the jobs amongst as many unemployed as possible. In the 2002 National Assembly of *Piqueteros*, a motion was passed that abandoned factories, or those that made many redundant, should be expropriated from the owners and self-managed by the workers. This has also been voted for on numerous occasions at the *Interbarrial*, the weekly general assembly of the neighbourhood assemblies. Zanon workers have, from the start, forged fruitful links with other groups and won great respect for their resistance and level of activism. In the first month of their occupation, October 2001, they joined *piqueteros* and other groups to blockade bridges and highways in Neuquén, and they have visited Buenos Aires and other cities to take part in assemblies and demonstrations. In return, as we have already noted, they have been successfully assisted by *piqueteros* and others in attempted evictions.

The Brukman workers decided to occupy on the 18th of December 2001 after a collapse in wages in the autumn months, (they were being paid in 'vouchers' of dubious value), and general contempt from the bosses. One 28 year old worker died after they refused to pay for vital medicines. They had not originally planned to set the plant in motion, but when an order of textiles became due in January, they decided to sell it to pay their wages. They have since taken responsibility for the plant – paying bills, fixing a boiler, and reorganised the factory floor to save on energy costs. "We maintain our struggle not through stubbornness but through principles and logic. The owners have demonstrated that they are incapable of running this factory – all they know is how to exploit us, steal our money and invest in non-existent companies. If we could get the company on its feet, why couldn't they?...Brukman has a total debt of 8 million dollars, and its major creditor is the State, with more than 2.5 million owed to the National Bank. So the demand we make is that the company be municipalized...under workers' control."[43] Like Zanon, as we have seen, they are not waiting for the state's endorsement, but are running the plant with the assistance of neighbours and others. They also offer to turn the plant's